Bella Sara Sunflowers

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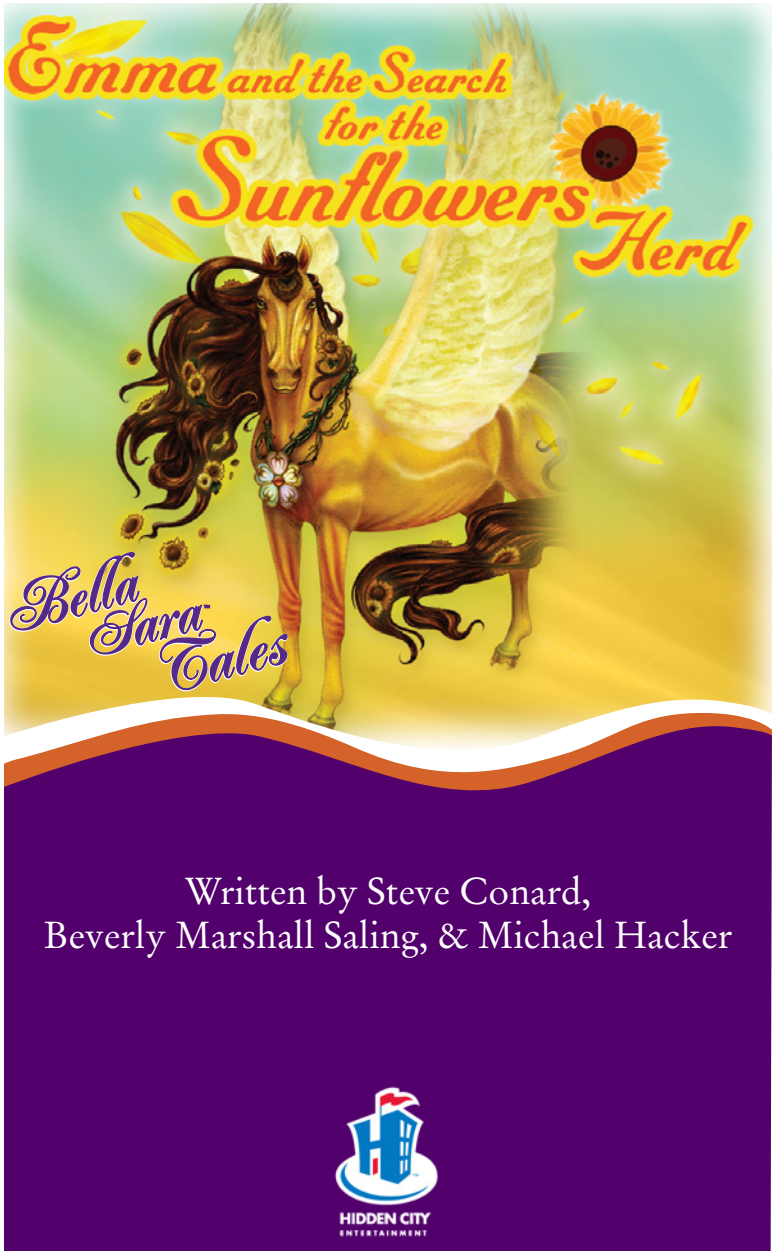
Emma and the Search for the Sunflowers Herd
Bella Sara Tales
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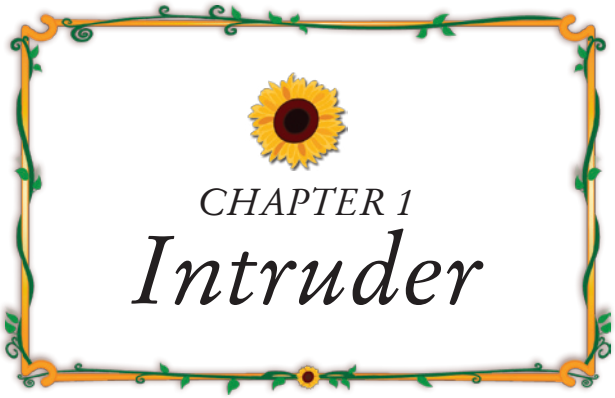


CHAPTER 1
Intruder

Emma Roland tugged wearily at the trailing ruffles of her purple gown as she made her way down the steps from the dais to the ballroom floor. This dress was the most beautiful thing she'd ever worn, but after hours of swishing her way through the crowd at Bella's Ball, she was getting tired of tripping over it. She kept smiling, though, since she knew practically everyone was looking at her. She was guest of honor, after all, and the ballrooms of Rolandsgaard Castle were filled with brightly dressed horses, humans, and other guests who had traveled from all over North of North just to get a glimpse of her.

Her friend Deru smiled as Emma came down to meet her. Deru was a dryad and could magically grow her own clothes. Once the ball was over, she'd be able to change her formal gown of white poinsettia petals into something more comfortable in an instant. Emma had to admit she was a little jealous. She would need far longer just to pull out all the orchids woven into her long brown hair.

Emma yawned with relief when the trumpets signaled that it was almost midnight—time for the fireworks show that would end the ball. Heralds began ushering the guests out to the courtyard and lawns, where they could get a full view of the fireworks over Rolandsgaard Castle. Deru turned to follow them, but Emma gently took hold of her elbow.

"Let's stay here," suggested Emma. "We can see the fireworks through the Wind's Eye." The Wind's Eye, a huge portal in the ceiling, was open to the sky so flying horses could enter and exit the castle more easily.

"Sure, that'll be fun!" As usual, Deru smiled and agreed with whatever Emma wanted. Sometimes Emma found it annoying, but right now she was grateful for her friend's easygoing nature.

"C'mon, Em!" hollered Emma's cousin Colm from clear across the cavernous ballroom, which was now mostly empty. Colm annoyed Emma far more often than just sometimes. "We're going to miss the show!"

"Deru and I are staying here," called Emma. "Go on and catch up with the horses. We'll see you later."

Colm stomped back toward the girls, clearly enjoying the *clop-clop* sound his jeweled dress boots made on the polished marble floor. "Oh no, I'm not going without you. I don't know

anyone out there—not any people, anyways."

"What about Shine? Didn't I see you dancing with her?" teased Emma.

"Aw, she went home hours ago," said Colm. "I guess she has to be up early to open her family's jewelry shop."

"Stay here with us, then," invited Deru before Emma could stop her. "The fireworks will look great through the Wind's Eye."

As if to prove Deru right, the orchestra began to play and the first of the fireworks shot skywards. She could hear the crowd cheering wildly outside. Fireworks had always seemed magical back on Earth, but in North of North they really were enhanced by magic. Emma gasped when they produced not only the familiar shower of sparks, but also glowing pictures that hung in the sky. One series of blasts formed an image of the gigantic World Tree, Drasilmare. Deru, who was a dryad of Drasilmare, whistled and cheered loudly.

The next firework looked like the front

half of a rearing white horse. "That's the symbol of Bella's herd!" said Emma.

"Yes, Herd Bellasara. And you know that one too," said Deru, pointing to a pair of glowing purple wings.

"That's the symbol of Herd Airistos—Nike's herd," said Emma, nodding. She proudly named three more symbols: the red book and spiral of Fiona's Herd Shahazar, the green gem of Jewel's Herd Islandar, and the blue lightning bolts of Thunder's Herd Valeryk. But she had to ask Deru for help identifying a set of white columns outlined with aquamarine sparks.

"That's for Herd Pantheon," answered Deru. "They're friends with the gods."

"Wow," said Emma. "That one looks like a white flower with rainbow edges. Is it a herd symbol too?"

"Yes, that's Herd Elemyn," said Deru. "They're elemental horses, made of water like Lien, or stone like Diamond, or fire—"

"Like my steed Soot!" interrupted Colm excitedly.

"Right," said Deru. "And that golden flower is the symbol of Herd Sunflower, the flower and plant horses."

"That purple and teal one looks like a magic wand," said Emma. "Who's that for?"

"That's Herd Moonfairy," said Deru. "They're all different kinds of fairy horses: sprites, pixies, brownies, naiads, dryads, and so on."

"So if your steed Twig is a dryad like you, that means she's a Moonfairy," said Colm.

"Right again," said Deru. "You're very smart." Colm grinned and looked at Emma to make sure she heard that.

"If you're so smart, Colm, you tell us who that yellow shooting star belongs to," said Emma innocently.

"That? That's Herd Star… um… Starshooter," guessed Colm.

"Starlight," corrected Deru. "You don't see many Starlights around anymore. Nyx was born a Starlight, but then she became a Valeryk

when she married Iceking."

"Hey, I was pretty close," said Colm.

"Sure you were," said Emma. "What herd is the brown horse profile for?"

"Yay! They included Herd Mustang!" cried Deru, clapping her hands. "They're wild horses, and they're sort of not even a herd anymore, but they deserve to be honored too, right?"

Emma wanted to ask what Deru meant, but she got distracted by an intense burst of rainbow flashes surrounding the largest and brightest firework of all: a shimmering purple orchid.

"That's Sigga's symbol—my symbol!" said Emma, flushed with pride. Outside, the crowd cheered more loudly than ever.

"*Our* symbol," said Colm. "I'm a Roland too, y'know!"

"You may be a Roland, but you're not a Valkyrie," said Emma primly. "The orchid is a Valkyrie symbol."

"Well, *you're* not really a Valkyrie yet, either," snapped Colm.

"Shh!" hissed Deru. "What's that sound?"

A burst of rustling, growling, squeaking, and thumping came from the staircase at the Grand Entrance. Emma, Deru, and Colm ran towards it but stopped short when they saw who was there. A tall, dark-haired woman in a white gown trimmed with fur and dried flowers stood proudly at the bottom of the stairs. She held Bella's own magical friend, the pink-furred Starstone Otter, struggling in her grasp.

"Ivenna," whispered Emma, instantly recognizing the leader of the dreaded Wolf Riders. Deru turned pale and hid behind Colm.

"Emma, dear child, I'm so glad you remember me," said Ivenna, oozing false charm. "When you didn't invite me to your little ball I thought surely you had forgotten."

"Let the otter go!" cried Colm, clenching his fists and taking a step toward Ivenna.

"And here's Colm too, brave and *stupid* as ever," gushed Ivenna. "Do you think you can touch me, boy?"

"He won't have to," said a voice from behind the three friends. Tyri, Emma's Valkyrie teacher, strode past them to face Ivenna. Her spectral arborium sword appeared in her hand as if conjured from thin air, and she pointed its business end at Ivenna's pale throat. "I would suggest that you do as he says."

"Hello, Tyri. My, what a cute, flowery dress you have on! I do believe it makes you look *almost* pretty," said Ivenna.

"How dare you come here?" demanded Tyri. Her voice was cool and confident, but her black eyes sparked with fury.

"Well, the Starstone Otter and I are such old friends that I just had to come to the ball and give her a hug," replied Ivenna, squeezing the otter till she stopped struggling and merely looked at Emma with sad, dark eyes.

"You couldn't care less about the otter. You just want the Starstone," said Emma, looking at the star-shaped pendant that hung around the otter's neck.

"True, it is a lovely thing," agreed Ivenna. "And with it in my possession I shall have little trouble finding the other horse pendants and the lost herds they belong to."

"What other pendants? What lost herds?" asked Emma skeptically.

"Sister, your student is shockingly ignorant," Ivenna said, turning to Tyri. "Have you really never told her about the herd leaders' pendants?"

"She has just begun her studies," said Tyri. "She still has much to learn."

Emma was tired of being talked about likexa little child. "Tell me now, then," she demanded.

"Go ahead, Sister," encouraged Ivenna. "I'll wait."

Still pointing her sword at Ivenna's neck, Tyri told Emma the story. "When your ancestor Sigga became the leader of the Valkyries, she took responsibility for protecting all the horses in North of North. To do that, she needed to be

able to talk to the founders of the great herds, even when they were far apart. So Sara gave each of the herd leaders a magical pendant, and she gave Sigga a special pendant called the Orchid Pendant. The Orchid Pendant could talk to any of the others, so Sigga used it to talk to the herd leaders and help them keep their herds safe."

"What happened to the pendants?" asked Emma.

"On the day that Sigga… left us," answered Tyri sadly, "Ivenna's boss, Feral, and the Wolf Riders attacked Rolandsgaard Castle, and the herd leaders came from realms all over North of North to defend it. Four of them—Airistos, Islandar, Shahazar, and Valeryk—were killed, and their pendants vanished. Feral also disappeared, and the Orchid Pendant disappeared with her. I bet Ivenna knows all about that, don't you?"

"Far be it from me to interrupt," said Ivenna, ever-so politely. "Please, go on."

Tyri glared at Ivenna. "With the Orchid Pendant and Feral both missing, the rest of the

herd leaders were afraid to wear their pendants anymore. So they hid them, or gave them to others to guard. Sunflower, Moonfairy, and Starlight took their herds into hiding as well. Nobody knows where they are, so they're called the lost herds. And the only horse pendant we've found is Starlight's, the Starstone."

"Which I happen to have right here," said Ivenna, smirking.

The Starstone Otter, quiet until now, chirped a couple of soft notes. Suddenly the Starstone vanished from around her neck.

"What trickery is this?" howled Ivenna.

That was an illusion. The real Starstone was never here, said a soft, motherly voice inside Emma's mind. It is in a place of safekeeping. Emma could tell the voice was coming from the otter, and a quick glance around told her that the others could hear it too.

"No matter," said Ivenna, regaining her composure. "I'm sure my dear friend the otter can be *persuaded* to tell me where it is."

Wolf Riders must never again touch the pendants, said the otter. *Emma, don't worry about me. I will tell her nothing.*

"We shall see about that," said Ivenna with a menacing smile. "But now I believe it's time for us to be off." She turned and a magic portal opened up behind her, giving Emma a glimpse of a dark, shadowy road inside it.

"Not so fast," said Tyri, moving forward till her sword point lightly touched Ivenna's neck. "You may go and good riddance, but you're leaving the otter here."

"I don't think so," said Ivenna calmly. "You could poke me with your pretty blade, true. But as you did, I would gladly snap this creature's delicate little neck. There are many more Wolf Riders, but this is the only Starstone Otter in all the world, and only she knows where the Starstone is. Would you really sacrifice that much just to be rid of me?"

Emma held her breath as Tyri stood silently, her face a mask of controlled anger. Finally,

the Valkyrie dropped her sword arm and whispered, "No."

"I knew it," said Ivenna. "You Valkyries have become tame. Remember, Emma: if you're going to be tame, you might as well be dead. Only the savage and wild are free."

As Ivenna stepped into the portal and waved goodbye, the otter spoke in Emma's mind again: *Find the pendants, find the lost herds, and protect them all. Do what Sigga left undone.*

"How?" cried Emma. "Please tell me what to do!"

Oracle, said the otter as the portal began to close.

"She's getting away!" yelled Colm, charging toward the closing portal.

Tyri's free hand reached out and grabbed him by the collar of his black leather jacket. "Never, ever enter the Shadow Path," she said fiercely. "The wolves guard it with the ghosts of their dead. Only their kind may travel it and live."

Colm gulped, and Tyri let him go. "But we can't just do nothing!" he insisted.

"We aren't going to do nothing," said Emma firmly. All eyes turned toward her. "We are going to find the pendants and the lost herds, like the otter said."

"We can't leave the otter in Ivenna's hands," said Tyri.

"No," agreed Emma. "Which is why you need to rescue the otter while the rest of us start looking for the pendants."

"I had hoped to go with you on your first Valkyrie quest," said Tyri slowly. "There is still so much you don't know."

"I can help!" cried Deru, perking up now that the Shadow Path had closed and Ivenna was gone. "I know lots of stuff! Ask me anything!"

"Thanks, Deru," said Emma. "Can you tell me what the otter meant when she said 'oracle'?"

"Well, an oracle is a person who can tell you your future," said Deru. "But there's also a

horse named Oracle. She guards one of North of North's great treasures, the Pool of Reflection. That's in Waterstone, just north of Trails End."

"So it's not too far away," said Emma. "Good. Let's pay Oracle a visit and see if she can tell us what to do next. Meanwhile Tyri can rescue the otter, and then we'll all meet back here afterward."

"Piece of cake," said Colm sarcastically. "Nothing can go wrong with that plan!"

"We do need to be careful," said Tyri. "Ivenna is dangerous, and outside of Trails End her spies are everywhere. But Emma is right. Saving the otter and finding the pendants and herds are both very important quests. We can't afford to give the Wolf Riders time to get too far ahead of us on either of them."

"So when do we ride?" asked Colm.

Emma felt Tyri's eyes on her. She wanted to find her steed Wings and fly off right now, but she forced herself to stop and think first, as Tyri had taught her. It was late, it was dark, they were

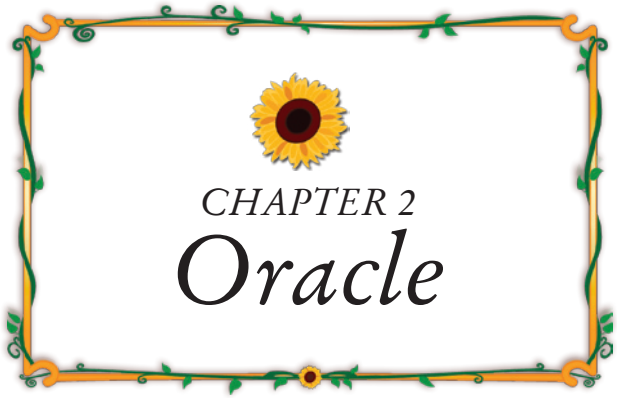
all exhausted and wearing ball clothes, and the horses were probably tired too.

"Tomorrow morning, as early as we can," said Emma. "That way we can start fresh and have daylight to see by."

Tyri smiled and Emma knew she had passed her first test. She was afraid the next one would be much harder.

Oracle
Look again. The most important things are often the hardest to see.
Guardian of the Pool of Reflection
Play online at BellaSara.com!

Next chapter... meet Oracle!



CHAPTER 2

Oracle

After such an exciting evening, morning came far too early for Emma. Colm looked groggy too, and his cowlicky blond hair stuck up in even more directions than usual. But Deru, always happy to greet the sun, bubbled over with cheerful eagerness. Her energy lifted Emma's mood, and even Colm felt more lively by the time they arrived at the Canter Hollow Stables and found their steeds waiting for them out front.

"There you are!" said Cade Traveler, the stable master. "Wings, Twig, and Soot are just about ready to ride. Give me a minute and I'll be right back."

When Wings saw Emma, he tossed his black mane in greeting and sent her a rapid series of mental pictures: Mr. Smithin, the blacksmith, checking his horseshoes, Cade's assistants carefully brushing his bright white coat, and Cade himself loading his saddlebags with food and supplies.

"I guess you got the royal treatment," said Emma as she patted his neck affectionately. "No more than you deserve, of course." One look at Twig's glossy brown coat and shiny hooves told Emma's experienced eye that Deru's steed had been pampered as well. As for Colm's steed, Soot, no one could ever brush *all* of the soft flakes of soot from his black hide, but Cade's assistants had clearly tried, and Colm seemed satisfied.

Cade's magical friend, Noble, a floppy-eared

ambassador hound with shaggy purple and gold fur, butted his head on Colm's hand. Colm gave him a few rough pets, and soon the two were play-wrestling and rolling around in the street.

"I'm not sure which one is the dog," said Emma, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, but it's so sweet of Colm to play with Noble," said Deru. "Too many people around here don't like dogs. Everyone thinks they're like wolves, but ambassador hounds aren't related to wolves at all. In fact, they originally came from—"

Just then a red-haired girl in a rainbow-colored jumper shouted greetings and ran up the street to meet them. "Oh, good, I'm glad I caught you," she said breathlessly. "My name is Penny Inkwell, and I'm a reporter with the *Canter Hollow Post.* So how does it feel to be setting out on your first Valkyrie quest?" The girl pulled a notebook and a rainbow-colored quill pen out of her bag and looked at Emma expectantly.

"Does *everyone* know I'm going on a

quest?" asked Emma, flustered by Penny's attention.

"No, and they won't until they read the Canter Hollow Post," replied Penny with a grin. "I only know because I saw Cade going into Mother Comfort's Delightful Candies, and I know he doesn't eat sweets very often, so I asked him who he was shopping for and he told me he was getting stuff for you to take on a quest. So where are you going?"

"Waterstone," said Colm, pushing forward to stand between Penny and Emma. "We're going to see Oracle about finding the lost—"

"Wait," interrupted Emma. "I'm sorry, Penny, but we don't really have time to do an interview right now. Cade will be back any minute and then we've got to get going."

"Aw, c'mon, Em!" said Colm. "The people deserve to know! What good is a heroic adventure if nobody knows it's happening?"

"I'm not going to wait around here just so you can show off," snapped Emma.

"Penny, what if Emma promises to tell you all about the quest the moment it's over?" suggested Deru. "It will still be news to your readers, but that way she can give you all the details of how it happened."

"It's a deal!" said Penny. She offered her hand to Emma, who shook it uncertainly. "Can I at least get a quick portrait of the three of you?"

"Awesome!" said Colm, furiously brushing dirt from his hair and clothes. "Let's do it in front of that cool fountain over there."

Since Cade still wasn't back, Emma reluctantly agreed. Penny posed the three friends, then stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. As if from nowhere, a tiny creature with pointed ears, purple skin, and bright green hair appeared by her side, carrying a painter's palette in one hand and an easel in the other.

"This is Pixxle," said Penny. "He's a twinkle imp and the *Canter Hollow Post*'s best artist."

Emma smoothed her ponytail and again

wished she could simply grow perfect clothes like Deru did. Deru's delicate dress of pink and white flower petals made her warm brown skin glow like polished wood. Emma's own blue riding pants, white blouse, and purple vest were clean and neat but not exactly pretty. At least she looked better than Colm, whose linen shirt looked rumpled under his well-worn leather jacket and whose patched jeans still had clumps of dog hair stuck to them.

Pixxle darted around the posed group, staring at them intently from above, below, sideways, and every other possible angle. Finally the imp hopped behind his easel. After just a couple of seconds, he proudly showed them a perfectly captured image of themselves.

"Hey," said Colm, "I've still got dog hair on me. You've gotta paint over that!"

Pixxle stuck his tongue out at Colm and zipped away in a blur of purple and green, taking the portrait with him. Emma and Deru giggled, and Penny gave them a wink.

Just then Cade returned with three small bundles and tucked one in the top of each horse's bag. "I couldn't let you go without some of Mother Comfort's sweets," he said shyly.

Thank you, Cade," said Emma. "It looks like you've thought of everything we could want." The stable master quickly looked down at his feet, but Emma caught a glimpse of his smile.

After saying goodbye to Penny and Cade, the three adventurers mounted their steeds. Twig sent everyone a mental picture of lush, green hills dotted with ponds and lakes, then leaped into the sky and began galloping on the wind.

"Follow us!" called Deru. "Twig knows the way

"Okay, then," whispered Emma to Wings as he spread the great, white-feathered pair for which he was named. "Let's go to Waterstone!"

Soot hesitated a moment, tail twitching. But when he saw his friends disappearing, he burst into magical flame and shot into the air after them.

"Wahoo!" cried Colm. "Wait for us!"

*****

Emma never got tired of flying on Wings. Every time reminded her of their first flight together, when her fear of falling off was overwhelmed by the powerful joy of soaring away from everything that held her down. Now she and Wings trusted each other enough that she never worried about falling, even when she leaned down to get a better view of the Bella and Bello Monuments—great stone horse heads carved into the mountains that marked Trails End's northern border. Everyplace they went from here on out would be new to Emma, but with Wings carrying her higher and higher, she felt like the whole sky and everything beneath it belonged to her and her steed.

By the time they reached Waterstone, Emma's stomach felt terribly hollow, so she suggested they stop for a quick picnic in one of its many gardens. Even Deru fell almost silent as they filled their mouths with the creamy bovo-cheese sandwiches and crisp apples Cade had packed. Colm cheered when he opened the bundles from

Mother Comfort's Delightful Candies and found tangy-sweet plumberry pocket pies along with comfort treats for the horses.

As they stowed the leftovers in their saddlebags, Emma saw a young man approaching them. He had shoulder-length hair and a scruffy beard, and the knees of his short pants were dirty and grass-stained, making Emma think he might be some kind of hobo. But no hobo would have such a finely woven blue shirt or a vest with a shining, amber-colored gemstone brooch pinned to it. The man's woven-grass hat did its best to shade his suntanned face, and the worn leather bag strapped across his chest bulged with interestingly shaped lumps.

"Hello there!" called the young man. "I'm the gardener here. Are you folks looking for the Pool of Reflection?"

"Yes," said Emma. "Can you tell us how to get there from here?"

"I can do better than that," said the gardener. "I can take you right to it. And I can give

you this." He reached into his bag, pulled out a surprisingly intact orchid blossom, and tucked it into Emma's hair behind her ear. "May this bloom help you find what you seek."

Startled, Emma barely remembered to thank the man. She wondered how he knew to give her an orchid. Did everybody in North of North already know who she was?

The gardener turned to Deru. "You, my dear, are already in fine flower," he said, nodding toward the wreath Deru had grown in her ankle-length black hair. "So perhaps you would prefer this." With a flourish, he produced a glossy, golden acorn that seemed to glow with its own light.

"Oooh, a sun acorn! How pretty!" said Deru. She flashed the man a beaming smile of thanks and tied the acorn onto a vine that suddenly grew around her wrist like a bracelet.

"Got anything in there for me?" asked Colm, trying to peek into the bag.

"No, for you I have something different,"

said the gardener. He reached down, plucked a dandelion from the ground, and stuck it into the top buttonhole of Colm's black leather jacket.

"Great," said Colm. "I get a weed."

The man smiled. "A weed is just a flower that is in the wrong place," he said. "But if you plant it somewhere else, it may grow into just the thing you were looking for."

"Whatever," said Colm. "Can we just go to the pool already?"

"Of course," said the gardener.

The young man led them down a white gravel path, then up a hill topped with a circle of trees and flowering bushes. In the center of the circle was a large, round pool so perfectly still that Emma could see every detail of its surroundings reflected in the water.

"Is this the Pool of Reflection?" asked Emma.

"It is the main pool, certainly," replied the gardener. "Would you like to see the others?"

At Emma's nod, the man continued around

to the other side of the pool, where it spilled out into a wide, clear waterfall. Emma stepped closer and watched the waterfall flow down into a series of smaller cascades that fed into dozens of lower pools further down the hillside. She turned back to the main pool just in time to see a young yellow and white mermare lower her head to hide among the lily pads. A matching yellow and pink one swam over and looked up at Emma and her friends. Wings and Soot eyed the mermare curiously until she gave a little toss of her head, inviting them to come closer. Then Wings looked at Emma hopefully.

"Oh, go ahead," said Emma, laughing. "Looks like you've found a new friend."

As Wings greeted the mermare, Twig nudged Emma's shoulder and nodded toward another horse walking up the hillside toward them. The black mare had a white mane and glowing white markings that seemed to have been written on her body.

"You must be Oracle," said Emma, giving

the black horse an awkward bow. "My name is Emma Roland."

"Welcome. Emma. Roland," came a series of high-pitched voices. When Emma looked around to see where they came from, she spotted several tiny water fairies dancing hand in hand on the water.

"Spring sprites!" cried Deru, coming closer to inspect them. "I love how they talk, each saying one word at a time. They're very clever, you know."

"Yeah, they sound real smart," said Colm, peering into the pool. Several of the tiny creatures chose that moment to fly up and dive in beside him, splashing his face. "Hey! Knock it off!"

"Yes. Clever," chirped the sprites.

Emma turned back to Oracle. "The Starstone Otter told me that you could help me with my quest. Please, can you tell me what to do next?"

Oracle sent Emma a mental image of

Emma looking into the water. Nervously, Emma leaned over and peered into the main pool. On its surface, she saw a series of quick images that blurred into each other: angry horses bucking and rearing, joyous horses dancing in celebration, ghostly horses staring at her as if trying to tell her something.

"What does it mean?" asked Emma, shaking her head in confusion.

"I don't know," said Deru. "It could be things that are going to happen, or it could be things that *might* happen if we do the right or wrong things."

"How can I tell which is which?" Emma asked. "This isn't helping at all!"

"Look. Again. The. Most. Important. Things. Are. Often. The. Hardest. To. See," replied a choir of musical voices.

Emma felt Oracle gently touching her mind with another mental image: a lavender orchid floating on the water. Remembering the gardener's gift, Emma took the orchid from her hair

and slipped it into the pool.

"Follow. The. Water," sang the sprites. "Truth. Fate. Destiny."

The flower spun with the current, and a watery image formed in its wake. The image, which moved as if alive, showed Emma and Wings flying gracefully in a crystal blue sky. Deru and Twig rode the wind behind her, followed by an oddly gallant-looking Colm riding flame-covered Soot.

Emma glanced back at her cousin, who was wiping his wet face on the collar of his linen shirt and arguing with the sprites who had splashed him. *If that's Colm's future, it must be a long way off,* she thought.

The image faded as the flower dropped down a small waterfall into a lower pool. Emma didn't dare lose track of it, so she asked Deru to get Colm away from the sprites and meet her at the bottom. Then she hurried down the hill to follow the orchid to the next pool, where she saw a powerful chestnut stallion standing proudly on a rock outcropping, mane tossing wildly in the wind.

"Mustang. Sad. Mustang," chorused a nearby trio of spring sprites in mournful tones.

The image faded again as the orchid fell to the next pool. Here Emma saw an angelic mare who seemed to be made of pure, white light. Rainbow-colored bolts of electricity coursed through her mane and tail.

"Elemyn," said a sprite.

"Tempest," said another.

The orchid continued its journey, carried along the current down the series of waterfalls and pools, from one to the next. When it reached the fourth pool it showed Emma a regal, purple stallion with rainbow-feathered wings and eyes outlined in gold. He wore a tall, golden crown and stood on the Beach at the Edge of the World, looking out over its enormous waterfall toward the worlds beyond.

"Pantheon. Pantheon. Pantheon," chanted the sprites.

"These are the founders of the great herds, aren't they?" asked Emma, remembering the fireworks show at Bella's Ball, which already seemed to have been such a long time ago. Oracle nodded.

In the next pool down, it showed a palomino mare whose mane, tail, and socks twinkled with light as she streaked like a comet across the night sky. Emma didn't need the sprites to tell her this one must be Starlight.

The sixth pool displayed a softly glowing white mare with curly-edged gossamer wings and a crown made of flowering twigs. She danced in a beam of moonlight, and the sprites clapped their hands and danced little jigs as they cheered Moonfairy's name over and over.

Emma sighed as the orchid dropped into the final, bottommost pool. As she expected, it formed the image of a large sunflower that blossomed into a golden yellow, winged mare with sunflowers braided into her brown mane and tail. Around her neck she wore a pendant shaped like a flower with a smooth, round gemstone at its center.

"Sunflower," said a man's voice next to Emma.

Emma jumped. She had gotten so lost in the pools' images that she had forgotten the gardener even existed.

"You know this horse?" asked Emma as Deru came down to join her.

"Yes, of course," said the gardener. "She's

the patron of Herd Sunflower. My people have always counted ourselves lucky to have her friendship."

"You must be one of the old Sunflower Folk," said Deru. "I should have guessed—you know so much about flowers."

Colm wandered down and perched on a rock at the edge of the bottom pool, gazing at the image of Sunflower. The handful of spring sprites in the pool turned their backs on him and flew over to perch on Deru's shoulders.

"What can you tell me about Sunflower?" asked Emma.

"Are you ready to find her?" the gardener asked in return.

"That's what I came here for!" cried Emma.

"Then I'm here to help you," said the gardener calmly. "I've been waiting for Emma Roland for a very long time now."

"You and everybody else in the world," said Colm, looking up from the pool. "Would've

been nice if you'd bothered to mention that before now, though."

Ignoring Colm, the gardener said, "Like you, I too once came here looking for someone." He gave Oracle a wry smile. "Oracle's pools told me that first I had a job to do. One day a girl would come on wings to reunite all of North of North's herds, and I must help her."

"Girl. On. Wings," chimed the sprites. "Emma. Roland."

Colm suddenly stood up and pointed at the gardener's brooch. "Hey," he said suspiciously, "your stone looks just like the one in Sunflower's pendant."

"That's because it *is* the Sunstone," replied the gardener. "Sunflower entrusted it to me, and now it will lead us to her." He unpinned the stone from his vest and handed it to Emma.

"Sunstone. Sunstone. Sunstone," chanted the sprites.

The tawny gold Sunstone sparkled and pulsed in Emma's hand. The sweet scent of summer

flowers filled the air, and excitement filled her heart. She had already found one of the pendants, plus someone who could lead her right to one of the lost herd leaders!

The gardener beamed at the delight on Emma's face. "At long last, we meet at the crossroads, you at the beginning of your journey and me at the end of mine."

"Thank you so much, Mr.— Wait, I don't even know your name!" Emma finally managed to say.

"Most folks call me Mr. Bloom," said the young man. "But since I'm sure we're going to be great friends, you can call me Johan."

"Thank you, Johan," said Emma. "And thank you, too, Oracle. I can't wait to show Wings! C'mon!"

Emma, Deru, Johan, and Oracle began climbing the hill back to the top of the waterfalls. Colm checked to make sure they weren't looking, then pulled the dandelion from his buttonhole and tossed it into the bottom pool. The water rippled in response and formed an image of him dressed in some sort of silly dandelion costume.

"Dandy," said one of the spring sprites with a smirk.

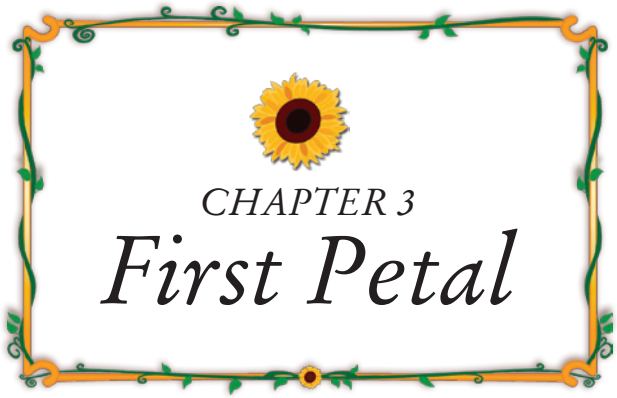
"Lion," said another.

"Dandelion yourself," muttered Colm. He grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it into the pool, breaking up the image and nearly hitting one of the sprites. They all flew in circles around him, chattering angrily.

Beneath their high-pitched fury, Colm heard a deeper, growling sound, like a dog—or a wolf. He whirled around and thought he caught a glimpse of red fur somewhere in the bushes, but the sprites kept blocking his view. When he got the chance to look again, it was gone. He gave up and started back up the hill after Emma, swatting away a sprite that kept chucking pebbles at his head.

As Colm walked away, the bushes behind him rustled too quietly for him to hear.

Next chapter... meet Cayenne!



CHAPTER 3
First Petal

Emma and the others waited at the top of the hill for Colm, who still had a pair of angry spring sprites pulling on his rumpled hair when he arrived. Deru called the sprites over to her and murmured a few soothing words to them while Colm stomped over to stand on the other side of Emma.

"So, if that thing is the Sunstone," said Colm grumpily, pointing at the smooth, round gem now pinned to Emma's vest, "why isn't it a pendant? And why doesn't it look like a flower?"

"When Sunflower gave me the Sunstone," answered Johan, "she warned me that the Wolf Riders would come looking for it. To make it harder for them to find, I took the petals off and hid them in five different places. But I kept the center stone with me, and I put it on a pin so I couldn't lose it."

"So thanks to you, the Sunstone is broken," said Colm. "And now we've got to find all the pieces and glue it back together or something."

"Oh, it's not broken," said Johan. "The petals are designed to fit into their places like puzzle pieces. All we have to do is collect them."

"Well, let's get started," said Emma. "I want to show Tyri the pendant when we get back to Rolandsgaard tonight."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," said Johan. "I couldn't hide the petals too close together,

or it would have been too easy for the Wolf Riders to find them. So I hid them all over the world. It will take many days of riding to reach them all."

"Oh," said Emma, disappointment in her voice. She had hoped Tyri would be proud of her for finding a pendant so quickly, but now it would likely take a week or two just to collect all the pieces of the Sunstone. Besides, Emma had barely gotten used to life in Trails End, her new home. How much more difficult and dangerous would it be out in the strange, wild parts of North of North?

Emma got her answer when the spring sprites on Deru's shoulders suddenly shot into the air and began flying in frightened circles.

"Wolves! Wolves!" they shrieked. Soon a whole swarm of their sisters joined them, all squeaking and fluttering with fear.

"Where?" shouted Emma, trying to be heard over the high-pitched din.

As one, the sprites turned in the air and

pointed. Emma looked just in time to see a pair of large wolves—one red-furred, one gray—break from the bushes on the far edge of the gardens and race away across the hills.

"Aw, let 'em run," said Colm. "Looks like we scared them off when we beat them to the Sunstone."

"I doubt it," said Johan grimly. "More likely, they are off to tell their mistress what happened here. Ivenna will have the whole pack on our trail soon enough."

"We've gotta go now, then," said Colm. "Get the petals before the wolves get us."

"But we're supposed to meet Tyri back at Rolandsgaard," said Deru, her black eyes wide. "She'll be worried if we don't come."

Emma didn't know what to do. The thought of racing all over this unfamiliar world with Ivenna's pack hot on her heels made her stomach knot. But if they lost time going back to Rolandsgaard, the wolves might attack them before they even got started. And then what would

happen to the Sunstone?

Johan put a work-roughened hand on Emma's shoulder. "Whatever you decide," he said, "I am here to help you, Emma Roland."

I am a Roland, thought Emma. *I have a duty to protect this world. I can't let my fear keep me from doing it.*

"Okay," said Emma, looking around at her friends. "Let's get the petals."

"Sweet!" said Colm. He whistled loudly to Soot, who indulgently trotted over to his rider. Wings and Twig followed to see what was going on, and Emma explained what they were going to do.

"I wish we could tell Tyri what's going on," finished Emma. "Maybe she could catch up to us."

Wings sent a quick series of mental images: a pink water lily, a white lotus, and two mermares swimming through the Rivergate into Rolandsgaard Castle. It took Emma a moment to recognize the water horses as the ones Wings and

Soot had been talking to.

"Waterlily and Lotus are your new friends, right?" asked Emma. "Do you trust them to carry a message for us?" When Wings nodded, Emma sent him to ask the mermares for their help.

"That's done," said Emma. "Now, Johan, please tell us where the petals are so we can get going."

"I don't *think* I can tell you," said Johan. "I don't remember where I put them—not exactly."

"Of course you don't," said Colm scornfully. "They're only part of this super-important thing you were supposed to be guarding. No wonder they slipped your mind."

"Young man, it has been almost a thousand years since I hid those petals," said Johan, sounding irritated for the first time. "And I don't need to remember where they are, because I can use the Sunstone to lead us to them."

"I guess you'll have to come with us, then," said Emma, cutting off Colm's next remark with

a threatening glare.

"You can ride with me on Twig if you like," offered Deru. "She looks delicate, but she's strong enough to carry two."

"Thank you kindly," said Johan, "but I have my own steed." He pulled a tiny bottle of red powder out of his bag and threw a pinch of it into the breeze. Moments later a spotted red mare trotted up to join them. She wore a beautiful garland of white flowers, green leaves, and small red peppers woven into her mane and tail.

"This is Cayenne," said Johan. "Cayenne, this is Soot, Colm, Twig, and Deru. The fellow by the pool there is Wings, and this is Emma Roland." Cayenne nodded to each of them in turn, then raised her foreleg to Emma in greeting. Emma saw it had a mark shaped like a cayenne pepper on it.

"A Spice mare!" said Deru admiringly. "I thought only the Travelers worked with Spice horses."

"Oh, the Travelers and I go way back,"

said Johan. "I taught them the secret of growing plants with Earth loam, and they introduced me to this fiery girl here. Best bargain I ever made." Cayenne blew affectionately at him, and he patted her neck.

Emma had learned a little about the mysterious Travelers from Cade, but not much. From what she remembered, the Travelers were a tight-knit band of wandering craftsfolk and traders who didn't often make friends with outsiders. Knowing Johan had earned their trust made Emma feel safer trusting him herself.

"Can Spice horses fly?" asked Colm. "'Cause if they can't, you two are really gonna slow us down."

"Cayenne may be a land horse," said Johan, "but she's been traveling the world long enough to pick up a few tricks. I believe you'll find your own steeds move even faster with her along." Colm looked skeptical, but Cayenne's blue eyes twinkled.

"It won't matter how fast we go if we don't

get started," said Emma. "Johan, which way?"

Johan knelt and put his hand on the ground, then stared at the Sunstone for a long moment. "Northeast," he said.

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As they rode across the countryside, Emma saw that Johan was right. Cayenne had amazing speed and so much endurance that the other horses seemed to draw energy from her. Emma knew the horses should never have been able to gallop so long—and even if they could, they shouldn't have covered anywhere near this much ground. Yet none of the horses seemed nearly as tired as she felt herself. Even when the ground turned from lush, hilly grassland to rocky mountain trails, the horses kept their pace swift and steady.

Both horses and people did get hungry, though, so Emma was glad when Johan called a halt next to a narrow mountain stream and began

unpacking food and camping gear from Cayenne's saddlebags.

"We should probably stop here for the night," said Johan.

"Already?" scoffed Colm. "We've still got at least an hour of daylight left."

"When we come out of the Ochre Mountains, we'll be on the edge of the Autumn Sands," replied Johan. "That means we need to get an early start so we can rest during the hottest part of the day and still make good progress."

"Are you sure we have to go through the desert?" asked Emma nervously as she fed Wings an apple.

"I'm sure," said Johan. "Right now the Sunstone is pointing us directly to Aria, the Autumn Sands' most famous oasis. There aren't any other plants for miles around, so the Sunstone picks up Aria like a beacon."

"It must sense the Greenroads," said Deru.

"The what?" mumbled Colm, his mouth

already full of leftover plumberry pie.

"The Greenroads," repeated Deru. "All living things give off magical energy. Plants stay in one place, so their energy eventually links together, and the links form a pattern of connecting lines. Those are the Greenroads."

"That's quite right," said Johan. "Anyone good with plant magic can sense the strongest Greenroads, like the ones that connect big forests. But with the Sunstone's help I can find even the tiny paths that lead to individual plants."

"Yay for you," said Colm. "But we're looking for Sunstone petals now, not plants."

"*Right now, the Sunstone petals are plants,*" explained Johan. "I disguised them from the Wolf Riders by planting them in the ground. With a little Earth loam, their own Sunflower magic turned them into beautiful flowers."

"Joy," said Colm. "Hope they haven't all died in the thousand years since you planted them."

"I'd know," Johan and Deru said at the

same time. Deru laughed. "If a plant with that much magical energy suddenly disappeared from the pattern, all of us who sense the Greenroads would know," she said.

"So if we start collecting the petals," said Emma slowly, "we'll alter the pattern, and people will know. Won't that lead the Wolf Riders right to us?"

"I doubt the Wolf Riders can sense the Greenroads," said Johan. "They prefer darker paths. But you're right. The more petals we collect, the more chances they have to spot us."

The others kept talking about the Greenroads, but Emma didn't hear much of what they said. Instead, she wrote in her Ballad, a magical journal the goddess Sara once gave her:

I don't know what we're going to do if Ivenna and her wolves catch up with us. I trust Johan to lead us to the petals, but I sure wish we had Tyri here too. Maybe we should have gone back to Rolandsgaard after all.

Emma's worries kept her quiet most of the next morning as they continued by land, riding down into a scrubby valley between the Ochre Mountains and a range of colorful, flat-topped mountains Johan called the Pinto Mesas. Beyond the Mesas lay the huge Autumn Sands Desert, but here in the valley they were protected from the desert's extreme heat. Dry, little gusts of wind flurried down from the foothills as they rode, and when Wings spooked at one of them, Emma realized her steed sensed her jumpy mood. *Settle down,* Emma told herself as she patted Wings's neck reassuringly. *If you can get through everything else that's happened since Mom and Dad died, you can survive this too.*

The journey toward Aria took all day, and by evening, when they stopped for dinner, Emma felt better. She even laughed when Colm's face turned bright red after his first bite of the spicy bean stew Johan made. But as they packed up and continued on after dinner and the sun drooped low in the sky, she started to worry again. What

if the wolves were already there, waiting in the shadows to ambush them? Or what if they lost their way in the dark and wandered off into the desert?

Just as the sun started to sink below the horizon, Colm whooped and pointed toward what looked like a shimmering smudge in the distance.

"There!" yelled Colm. "Is that it?"

"I believe so," Johan shouted back. "We'll have to hurry to get there before the last light fades."

But night had fully fallen by the time they got to Aria and dismounted to let the horses drink from the pool at its center. Two moons, a sky full of stars, and the distant lights of Shahazar Castle gave Emma just enough light to see shadowy shapes as she explored the oasis. Some of the shapes scurried away quickly and turned out to be big-eyed desert rodents. "Sand mice," Johan informed her. Other shapes turned out to be plants: palm trees, shrubs, and some kind of

succulent plant that reminded her of aloe. But nothing looked much like a magical flower to Emma.

"Johan, are you sure the Sunstone petal is a flower?" asked Emma.

"It has to be," said Johan. "It's too full of

flower magic to grow into anything else."

"It might not be a normal sort of flower, though," said Deru excitedly. "Look!"

Emma stumbled over to Deru and immediately understood what her friend meant. Clusters of crystal formations had grown into the shapes of flowers, forming a garden of sorts that glittered in the moonlight. When Emma leaned in for a closer look, the Sunstone brooch on her vest began to glow like a tiny sun. And a crystal flower shaped like a rose started to glow in return!

"The Desert Rose," said Johan softly. "Now I remember. I brought the first petal here, and Fiona helped me plant it."

As if summoned by the sound of her name, Fiona herself suddenly stepped from the shadows. Even in the darkness, Emma could not mistake the legendary mare with the fiery red coat.

"Fiona!" cried Emma. "I'm so glad to see you again!"

Fiona's appearance brought the other

horses from their resting place by the pool. They bowed their heads to her, and she nickered to them in greeting. Then she nodded solemnly to each of Emma's friends and finally returned her gaze to Emma. Emma waited a moment to see what Fiona wanted to do, then realized that Fiona was waiting for *her*. She took a deep breath.

"Fiona, thank you for protecting the Desert Rose," said Emma. "Now it's time for it to be a Sunstone petal again. May I please take it?"

Fiona nodded and sent Emma a mental image of Emma's own hands plucking the Desert Rose from its crystal stem. *This is it,* thought Emma as she grasped the glowing blossom, careful to hold it exactly as Fiona had shown her, and pulled gently.

With a tiny snap, the rose came off in Emma's hands. Immediately, its reddish glow brightened to pink, then white, finally bursting into a dazzling blaze of light so bright Emma's eyes shut without her telling them to. When she opened them again, the rose was gone. In its

place was a gold-edged cloisonné petal that still glowed with a faint pink light.

"That was easy," said Colm lightly. "Where to next?"

"Bed," said Emma firmly.

Next chapter... the Fairy Realm!

CHAPTER 4

Fairy Realm

Emma woke early the next morning when the rising sun reached the tall, narrow windows of her bedroom and filtered in through the gauzy curtains around her wooden bed. She stared at the colored patterns painted on the walls for a few moments before she remembered where she was: Shahazar Castle. Fiona had invited Emma and her friends to spend the night there, and they had jumped at the chance to sleep under a real roof. A real bath in fresh rosewater and a real breakfast of flatbread, honey, dates, yogurt, and sweetmint tea had done wonders for Emma's spirits.

By the time Emma, Deru, and Colm made it down to the castle's stables, Johan had already taken care of the horses and repacked their saddlebags with fresh food and as much water as they could carry.

"We've been on the edge of the Autumn Sands so far, but now we need to cross its heart," explained Johan. "There's not much but sun and sand from the Hope River to the Bow Mountains."

"Is the next petal in the mountains, then?" asked Emma eagerly.

"I don't think so," said Johan. "Not much grows there. But on the other side is the Emeraldian Wilds, which has a great abundance of plant life."

"And fairies!" said Deru, her face brightening. "The fairy realm is in the heart of the Emeraldian

Wilds. Herd Moonfairy used to live there too, before they went into hiding."

"Maybe we can find some sign of them along the way," said Emma hopefully.

"Perhaps," said Johan. His voice, suddenly sad and distant, made Emma want to ask more questions, but she knew they had to get going before the desert sun reached its full power.

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Even at the magically swift pace Cayenne set, it took two days to cross the Autumn Sands. By the second day the heat seemed to radiate from the sand itself as well as from the sun. Emma noticed that Wings began to glide above the dunes, only occasionally touching down with a hoof and sending up a little spray of sand. Twig also bounded in long leaps to avoid touching the ground, and the flowers in her dark green mane and tail wilted a little. But Soot charged to the front to gallop neck and neck with Cayenne,

and his black coat glowed with streaks of molten orange energy.

When they finally reached the bare, windy foothills of the Bow Mountains that evening, Emma worried it would take another whole day to climb those formidable peaks with their jagged cliffs. But Johan made camp at the mouth of a hidden valley and said it would take them straight through to the Emeraldian Wilds. Then he grew quiet again. The sun sank behind the mountains as they prepared dinner, and Deru began happily chattering to Colm about the wonders of the fairy realm. When Emma saw Johan get up silently and leave camp, she got up too and quietly followed him up a little stretch of scraggy hillside. She found him standing beside a boulder, staring into the dark valley with tears in his blue eyes.

"Johan," said Emma gently, "please tell me what's wrong."

"Back at the Pool of Reflection, I told you I had gone there looking for someone," said Johan

in a rough voice not much more than a whisper. Emma nodded. "Her name is Avalynn, and she and I have loved each other since we were children. But she is a phoenix fairy, and almost a thousand years ago she fell into the long, enchanted sleep of her kind. When the thousand years come to an end she will wake, and I promised her I would be there."

"Is Avalynn in the Emeraldian Wilds, then?" asked Emma.

"I think so," said Johan. "But the fairies don't allow mortals to enter their realm, especially since Sigga stopped protecting North of North. Finding Avalynn on my own was impossible. Now I can only hope Oracle was right that helping you will make it possible."

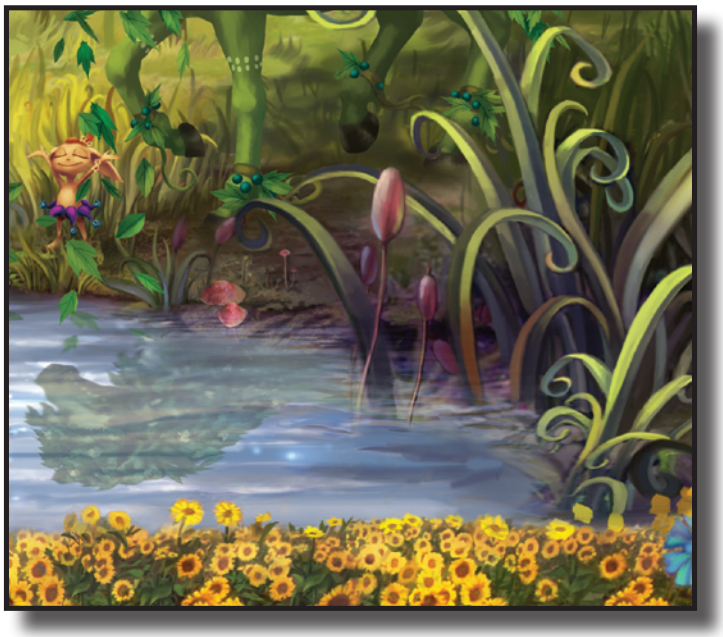
Emma put a comforting hand on Johan's arm. "If I can help you find her, I will," she promised.

The next day, Emma kept her eyes open for fairies as she and her friends rode through the narrow valley and down into the cool shade

of the Emeraldian Wilds. The horses moved fast along the winding dirt path through the forest, but Emma still caught glimpses of its amazing sights as she sped by. Everywhere she saw glorious tangles of green—mossy trees, leafy bushes, and delicate ferns. Bright butterflies provided splashes of fluttering color, little violet birds with long-plumed tails twittered merrily, and all kinds of strange forest creatures scampered about their business. Once she thought she saw a whole school of tiny, glittering fish leap out of the ground for an instant and then dive back into the dark, rich-smelling dirt.

"This place is freaky," said Colm, who had dropped back to ride between Deru and Emma. "Check out the door in that tree! And did you see the flying snake back there?"

"That's just a flitterwyrm," called Deru, looking back over her shoulder. "They're perfectly harmless." As she spoke a tree limb reached out to pluck a pink flower from her hair, but Twig neatly dodged it without breaking stride.



"Hey, hands off her!" yelled Colm, swatting at the branch as he and Soot passed by. The branch quickly pulled back.

"Oh, it's just saying hi," said Deru with a giggle. "All the trees here are used to having dryads to play with. It makes them ever so much more active, and I'm sure the exercise is good for—"

"Whoa!" shouted Johan from the front of the line. All the horses skidded to a stop in front

of a huge tree that had fallen across their path. Deru gasped and put her hand to her mouth as they all saw the deep claw marks marring its trunk.

"Wolves," said Emma grimly.

They know we're coming this way, and they're trying to stop us here," muttered Colm, thinking out loud. "We've gotta get out of here fast!"

Just then Emma heard growling behind them. When Wings whirled around she saw a red-furred wolf standing in the middle of the path, fangs bared. Several gray wolves melted out of the trees and bushes to join him and began to spread out. Spooked by their sudden appearance, Soot burst into panicked flame. Before Colm could stop him, he shot over the fallen tree and away down the path at such full blast that Emma was impressed Colm managed to stay on him.

"Soot, no!" cried Deru frantically. "You'll burn the whole forest down!" Twig caught Emma's eye and shot her a mental image of Twig

and Deru stomping out the beginnings of a forest fire. Then she jumped into the air, swooped over the tree, and galloped after Soot as Deru called for Emma and Johan to follow them.

Ignoring Soot and Twig, the wolves paced, trotting restlessly back and forth with their ears low and their teeth bared. Their fierce yellow eyes stayed fixed on Emma and Johan as they circled the group, drawing ever closer. The red wolf snarled and growled as if saying something Emma couldn't understand. The wolves were very close now.

"Go," whispered Johan. "We'll slow them down and then join you."

"No!" cried Emma bravely. "I won't leave you to fight them alone!" Wings squealed and struck at the red wolf, his sharp front hooves narrowly missing the wolf's head. The red wolf lunged for Wings's hind leg, but Wings jumped into the air just in time, spreading his enormous wings.

"Emma, you have the Sunstone," said Jo-

han urgently. "They *must not* get it. Now fly, quickly!"

Wings flapped his wings and tried to fly upward, but the canopy of tree branches overhead was too thick. While he struggled to turn around, Emma looked down and saw Cayenne spin and kick her back feet at the nearest wolf. As she did, she flicked her tail and released a red cloud of cayenne-pepper spray right in the wolves' faces. They yelped, shaking their heads and pawing at their eyes and noses.

Johan's eyes met Emma's as she and Wings flew over the fallen tree. Then Emma remembered: Cayenne couldn't fly. Could she possibly jump over the huge tree? Emma held her breath as Cayenne dove off the path, galloped *into* a different tree, and disappeared!

Emma stared back at the spot where Cayenne and Johan had vanished. Then Wings whinnied, and she looked forward just in time to see the two of them pop out of another tree far ahead and gallop back onto the path. Emma whooped

with joy as Wings flew to catch up.

"How did you do that?" asked Emma when Wings landed behind Cayenne and began galloping along with her.

"I told you my good girl knows a few tricks," replied Johan, patting Cayenne's red-spotted neck. "Her spice spray won't blind the wolves for long, though. We need to find your friends quickly."

It wasn't hard to follow the trail of soot flakes and singed branches that Soot had left behind. Before long, Emma and Johan found the others ankle-deep in a small creek just off the path. Deru and Colm were splashing Soot's steaming coat, and Soot himself hung his head as Twig tried to comfort him.

"Emma!" called Deru as soon as she saw them. "Soot's really sorry—"

"I know," said Emma quickly. "It's okay, really. But we've got to keep moving. The wolves won't be far behind us."

"We should get off the path," said Colm as he and Deru jumped back on their steeds. "If we follow this creek, it'll make it harder for them to track us by scent. Though I've gotta say, one of you really stinks."

"A good snort of Cayenne's pepper smell will keep the wolves from using their noses for quite a while," said Johan. "But you're right that they will expect us to stay on the path. I think I can lead us—"

Johan was cut off by an eerie howl that was much closer than Emma had hoped. Without another word, they all followed Johan and Cayenne away from the path and into the deep woods.

For the next half hour, Emma saw very little of the enchanted forest around her, but every rustling leaf they brushed past startled her, and every tiny twig that snapped under the horses' hooves made her jump. Twig, who went last, lagged so far behind the others that Emma almost motioned her to hurry up. Then she saw

that Twig and Deru were using their dryad magic to make the trees and bushes grow more thickly behind them, covering their trail and making it harder for the wolves to get through. She breathed a little easier after that.

Emma's relief didn't last long, though. Soon the group was forced to halt by a thick wall of tangled berry brambles and thorn bushes. It rose all the way to the forest canopy above their heads and stretched as far as they could see to either side. Not even the flying horses could get past it.

"I'm sorry," said Johan quietly after carefully inspecting the wall. "I thought this was just a thick band of plant magic, but it's a real, physical wall as well. We'll have to turn around."

"We can't," insisted Colm. "If we go back, we'll walk right into the wolf patrol out there trying to find us."

"What's this thing doing here, anyway?" asked Emma in frustration. "It can't be natural, can it?"

"It's a fairy wall, grown to protect the fairy realm from mortals," said Deru. "But Twig and I are dryads, so maybe it will let us pass."

Twig put her forehead gently against the wall, while Deru leaned forward and whispered to it in some breathy, soft language Emma didn't recognize. The brambles and thorns trembled as if shaken by a strong wind. Then, creaking and rustling, they untangled themselves and drew apart, creating a doorway in the wall.

"Go on in," said Deru, impatiently waving the others on. "We'll hold it open for you. But be careful, and don't touch anything."

Colm urged Soot through the doorway. "C'mon, you guys," he said over his shoulder. "I dunno what's in here, but it's gotta be better than a pack of wolves."

Emma and Johan looked at each other for a moment, but the sound of wolves howling made up their minds for them. They followed Colm through the doorway, and Deru let it close behind them. For all Emma could tell, the land in-

side the wall seemed just like the land outside it: deep, green, magical forest.

"Well, that got the wolves off our trail," said Emma. "But where do we go now?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Johan. "The fairy realm is so full of magic that trying to read the Greenroads in here is like trying to find a particular sunbeam by staring at the sun. We've also got to avoid fairy patrols—believe me, we don't want them to catch us in here."

"Um, Deru?" called Colm shakily from farther ahead. "A little help?"

All of them rushed forward to find Colm and Soot standing perfectly still in the middle of a path that led into a grove of carefully arranged trees. Each tree was covered with flowers and little round bubbles of different colors and sizes. When Soot turned, Emma saw Colm had a marble-sized green bubble in the palm of his hand.

"I know you said not to touch anything, and I really didn't mean to," Colm said quickly. "But it fell off the tree all by itself, and it was

going to land on Soot anyway, so I kinda caught it. And now I think there's something moving in there." He held the bubble out to Deru, who reluctantly took it from him and held it up to inspect it.

"Oh, dear," said Deru, her voice rising with fear. "This is not good."

"What is it?" asked Emma warily.

"It's a fairy egg," said Deru. "See the little fairy baby inside?" She held it up so Emma could see. Sure enough, inside the bubble was a tiny, winged baby, fast asleep with its thumb in its mouth.

"Maybe we can put it back," said Colm hopefully. "I think it came from—"

"It wouldn't matter if we could," Johan interrupted. "This must be the fairy nursery, the most sacred place in all the realm. The fairies would gladly blind us all for coming here without permission."

"*Blind* us?" gasped Emma, horrified.

"If not worse," muttered Johan darkly.

"We'd better take off before they get here, then," said Colm, looking around for somewhere to hide.

"Too late," sighed Deru, pointing at a swarm of glowing green dots flying toward them from the far side of the grove. She took a deep breath. "Stay here, and I'll see if I can explain things to them."

Twig and Deru went forward into the grove, and Deru carefully held the little fairy egg up over her bowed head. Several leaf-winged fairies about four inches tall snatched it out of her hands and flew off with it. Others shouted and shook their fists accusingly at Deru, while the rest surrounded Emma, Colm, and Johan, pointing their wands menacingly at their prisoners.

"Do something, Em!" whispered Colm, who was doing his best to keep jumpy Soot from exploding into flames again. "Tell 'em you're a famous Valkyrie on an important quest and they'd better let us go!"

"I think you just did," Emma whispered back as the fairies' faces grew even more furious. "They don't look impressed."

"They wouldn't be," said Johan tightly. "The fairies don't recognize any human authorities, not even Valkyries. To them, Emma is just another trespassing mortal."

Emma shivered and tried to see how things were going for Deru. She couldn't hear what Deru was saying, but she did see her point first at Colm, then at Emma. All the fairies stared at Emma. Their piercing green eyes made her wonder if she and her friends would have been better off taking their chances with the wolves.

After what seemed an eternity of talking and gesturing, a fairy who seemed to be the leader motioned to the others to bring Emma and her friends forward. The leader did seem a little less angry than the guard fairies, but Colm looked like he expected to spend the rest of his life in a fairy dungeon.

"I've apologized to the fairies for accidentally stumbling into their nursery," explained Deru. "They have graciously agreed to let us pass through their realm, but they must protect their secrets from mortal eyes. So they're going to cast a spell and put you to sleep."

"That's 'wake up in the morning' sleep, not 'have to get kissed by a prince' sleep, right?" asked Colm nervously.

Deru smiled weakly. "It's more of a drowsy, dreamy feeling," she said. "You'll still be able to ride, but you won't see or remember anything around you."

"That's very kind. Thank you. We'll be glad to do it that way," said Emma quickly, before Colm could make any more remarks.

One of the fairies had a golden horn shaped like a flower on his belt. When the leader nodded, he flew up to Colm and blew the horn right in his face. A blast of yellow pollen sprayed out, and Colm blinked rapidly. After a few moments, his eyes closed halfway and a goofy look crept over his face. Another fairy flew up and waved

her wand in front of his eyes, but Colm didn't seem to notice. The fairy nodded to her companion, and the two of them moved on to Soot, then Johan, then Cayenne.

Emma got nervous when her turn came. The pollen made her blink just like the others, and she felt very warm and sleepy. But when the second fairy waved her wand a little too close to Emma's eyes, she flinched. The fairy frowned, and Emma forced herself to relax and stay very still while the fairy tapped her wand on Emma's forehead and tickled her nose. Finally the fairy nodded in satisfaction, and she and her partner moved on to Wings.

When the fairies were done casting their spell, they flew to the front of the group and began singing a soft lullaby. Deru sang along with them as she and Twig followed them down the forest path. One by one, the sleepwalking horses and riders plodded along behind them. Emma forgot about the wolves and the Sunstone petals and just let the calming music wash over her.

As they rode through the magical, green fairy realm Emma drifted back and forth between sleeping and waking. She barely noticed when they turned down a fork in the road and entered a new area, where trees decorated with crystal ornaments grew into braided archways over the path.

Then a pale green unicorn caught her eye, and Emma tried to drag her mind free of its dreamy fog. The unicorn stood in the middle of a big circle of mushrooms, next to a piece of clear amber stone taller than Emma herself. She looked closer and saw that inside the amber was a sleeping girl with very long, red hair and fire-colored gossamer wings. Emma knew there was something important about this girl, but when the unicorn looked up at her and bowed, she forgot exactly what it was.

The next thing Emma knew, another wall of brambles and thorns loomed ahead. It looked just like the one where they entered the fairy realm, except this one had a heavy, wooden door

that opened as they approached. When Emma and her friends had all passed through the doorway, the door closed behind them and the brambles grew together in front of it as if it were never there.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" sang Deru happily, clapping her hands loudly. Suddenly Emma's mind was clear, though her body still felt tired and heavy. They still seemed to be deep

inside the forest.

"Where are we?" asked Emma.

"On the other side of the Emeraldian Wilds," said Deru. "If we ride south a few miles, we can camp near the mouth of the Bluegrass Narrows."

"Did you say the Bluegrass Narrows?" asked Johan, shaking his head groggily. "That's at least three days' ride from where we started!"

"It's only been one day, though," said Deru. "The fairies wanted to get rid of us quickly, so they took us the short way."

Colm yawned. "No way we were in there a whole day," he insisted. "I didn't sleep more than a few minutes. Dreamed the stupid fairies locked me up inside a giant dandelion."

"I dreamed I saw the most beautiful girl in the world," said Johan wistfully. "She gave me a lock of her red hair and told me we would see each other again soon."

"I saw her too," said Emma as the memory came back to her. "She was sleeping in this tall

amber stone, and there was a green unicorn with her, and really big mushrooms…."

Deru and Johan stared at Emma. "You saw Avalynn?" Johan asked eagerly. "You saw where she was?"

"I think so," said Emma. "It was up the road a bit from where we came out, in the place with the decorated trees."

"But that was a dream, right?" said Colm. "*I* didn't see any decorated trees."

"No, we really did go by a place like that," said Deru. "But don't let the fairies find out their spell didn't work on you, Emma, or we'll all be in big trouble."

"We have to go back," said Johan softly, as if talking to himself. "I have to go back and find her." He dug around in his bag and pulled out a pair of hand-size pruning shears.

"No, Johan, don't!" cried Deru in terror as Twig moved to put herself between Johan and the bramble wall. "We can't go back! The fairies were mad enough when we went there by acci-

dent. If you break in on purpose—"

"You don't understand," said Johan harshly. "Avalynn is my true love. I have searched for her for so long, and it's almost too late! Who knows if I will ever get this close again?"

"Johan, Deru's right," said Emma firmly as Wings went over to stand with Deru and Twig. "I know this is hard for you, but even if we did go back now the fairies wouldn't let us near Avalynn. They'd probably keep us from collecting the Sunstone petals too, and then Ivenna could get to Herd Sunflower before we do."

"You promised me, Emma." Johan's voice was rough with tears. "You said you'd help me find her if you could. Please, I beg you, help me."

"I *will* help you," Emma said softly with tears in her own eyes. "But Oracle said you have to help me with my quest before you can find Avalynn, and my quest isn't over yet. Finish helping me, and then I promise we will find her at the right time, just like she told you in your

dream."

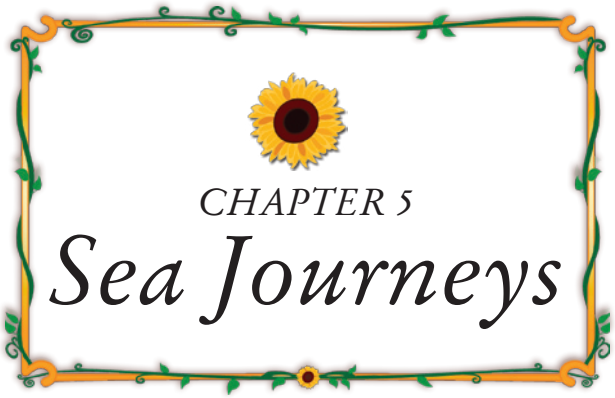
Johan said nothing, but he put the shears back in his bag. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes as he and Cayenne turned to ride away.

"Thank you," Deru told Emma as they followed Johan away from the wall. "That was very brave, and I really think you did the right thing."

"I don't get it," said Colm. "All that was about some girl?"

"Just shut up, Colm," said Emma wearily.

Next chapter... meet Jewel!



CHAPTER 5
Sea Journeys

Emma woke early the next morning to the thundering sound of water churning. She'd been too tired to look around much when they made camp the night before, but now she followed the sound down a broad, grassy slope to the frothing mouth of the Bluegrass Narrows. Emma was surprised to see the grass here actually *was* blue, or maybe blue-gray, and just tall enough that she could brush her hands over its soft tips as she walked.

When she got back to the campsite, the others were still asleep except for Johan. Emma found him squatting by the campfire, stirring a pot of oatmeal with some fat, bright pink berries in it.

"Hope you like coveberries," said Johan. "They're hard and a little salty right off the bush, but if you cook them they turn soft and sweet."

"I'm sure they're delicious," said Emma. After a moment she cautiously added, "Thank you for making breakfast, and for everything you've done. I don't know what we would have done if you… well, if you hadn't come with us last night."

"I'm sorry I gave you any reason to worry about that," said Johan, standing up to look Emma in the eye. "I might wish things were different, but the fact is, helping you *did* get me much closer to Avalynn than anything else I've done. I have to trust that continuing to help you will get me the rest of the way. Please forgive me

for my outburst."

"Of course," said Emma, surprising Johan with a warm hug. "Now let's get everybody moving so we can finish my quest and get back to yours."

After breakfast, Emma and her friends spent a very long day following Cayenne and Johan down a gently curving coastal road between the mossy woods of the Emeraldian Wilds and the bright, blue-green waters of the Equinesian Sea. At first the air was cool and the shoreline steep and rocky. But as they rode farther east, the salty-smelling sea wind began to blow warm on their faces and the beaches turned into wide stretches of pale sand. By nightfall, Emma looked forward to building a bonfire on the beach and falling asleep to the soft, rhythmic sounds of the surf.

"Wow, the Auroborus lights are really bright here," said Colm as they spread out their bedrolls beneath the dancing ribbons of rainbow light that took over the night sky.

"That's because we're not very far away from them," said Deru. "We're nearly to Equinesia, and after that there's the Celestial Deep, then the Beach at the Edge of the World, and then you're pretty much there."

"Where?" asked Colm confusedly.

"In the Auroborus, of course," said Deru, giggling. She smoothed the skirt of her pink-petal dress, which promptly turned into a pink-petal nightgown.

"I don't think we'll have to go that far," said Johan, a hint of amusement in his voice. "If I'm reading the Greenroads correctly, the next petal is a little southeast of us. We should reach it by tomorrow afternoon."

"Well, it's about time," Colm grumbled as he flopped down onto his bedroll and began undoing the binding straps on his boots.

Emma didn't say anything, but her feelings weren't too far from Colm's. Before going to sleep, she wrote in her Ballad journal:

I can't believe we've been traveling

for six days now and we still have only one of the five Sunstone petals! I believe with all my heart that finding the lost herds is my destiny. But if I'm so special, why is it taking me so long?

In the morning, Emma woke suddenly with the feeling that Wings was excited about something. When she found him, he was nibbling beach grass with the other horses—but there were five of them instead of four. The extra mare was an elegant bay with glittering gemstones in her forehead.

"Jewel!" cried Emma. She wanted to throw her arms around the legendary horse's neck but decided bowing would be more respectful. "What a wonderful surprise!"

Emma's glad shout woke Colm, Deru, and Johan and brought them stumbling out of bed to greet Jewel as well. Jewel nodded to each of them, then turned her deep brown eyes to Emma and sent everyone a mental image of a large pink and yellow flower.

"A hibiscus!" said Deru, clapping her hands. "Oh, it's so pretty!" Immediately several smaller versions of the flower grew in the wreath in her hair.

"That flower holds the next Sunstone petal, doesn't it?" asked Emma eagerly. "Please, can you take us to it?"

Jewel nodded and pointed her nose out to sea. Then she sent a mental image of them on their steeds following her as she trotted across the ocean toward an island. Twig and Cayenne snorted with surprise at the idea of walking on water, and Soot nervously backed up a few steps. But Emma could tell by the way Wings tilted his head that he felt more curious than frightened. *That's my brave boy,* she thought proudly.

Nobody wanted breakfast after that, so they packed up their things in record time and followed Jewel down the beach to the water's edge. With the perfectly smooth gait for which she was famous, Jewel walked right out onto the ocean as if it were nothing but a puddle in the road. Then she turned and nodded back at the other horses, repeating her mental image of them following her.

"C'mon, Wings!" whispered Emma to her steed. "Let's show 'em how it's done!"

Wings trotted after Jewel so eagerly that he started to lose his balance when the water moved unexpectedly under his hooves. But he spread his huge white wings out to steady himself, and got the hang of waterwalking well enough to catch up to Jewel in just a few moments.

Twig took things more slowly and carefully. She sniffed at the water and waited for her incredibly long mane and tail, which normally floated in the air around her, to finish draping themselves safely out of the way in Deru's lap. But once she got started, it took only a few unsteady steps before she too found her sea legs and walked out to the spot where Jewel and Wings stood floating on the water. When Soot hesitated, Cayenne went next, awkwardly but steadily making her way to Jewel.

After a long moment Soot stepped skittishly forward, but he shied away from the water at the last minute, the hot, orange streaks in his black coat pulsing brightly with fear. When Colm whispered something in his ear and patted his neck, he closed his eyes and put one fiery hoof onto the surf. But the heat made the water hiss and steam, and the unexpected sound sent Soot into full panic. He shot into the sky like a horse-shaped fireball, zigzagged crazily for a moment, then streaked away toward the southeast, where Jewel had pointed.

"We'll meeeeet yoouuu!" Colm called over his shoulder as Emma and Deru burst out laughing.

Jewel nickered to get their attention and started off across the sea. She began at a walk, but as the other horses got better at balancing on the water, she increased her speed to a trot, then a canter. As an expert rider, Emma was used to the normal up-and-down movement of riding a horse, but the ocean's waves gave Wings's gait an

extra sideways roll that forced her to pay more attention to her riding than she had in many years.

Before long Emma could see the island that Jewel had shown them shimmering in the distance: a bright ring of white sand lined with palm trees and crowned with a tall, double-peaked mountain Emma suspected might be a volcano. She breathed a sigh of relief when they got close enough to see that Colm and Soot were indeed waiting for them in the shallows by the beach. As he had after Soot's last panic attack, Colm splashed himself and Soot with water to cool down and get the worst of the soot off. For the first time, Emma noticed how patient and gentle Colm was with his quirky steed. *Too bad he's not like that with anybody else,* she thought.

"Hiya, slowpokes!" called Colm as Jewel led everyone else up onto the beach. His voice sounded like his usual teasing self, but his eyes begged Emma not to make fun of Soot.

"Hiya, wetpants!" Emma replied with a

wink. "Better get back in the saddle or the slowpokes will leave you behind!" Colm flashed her a quick grin, then hurriedly brushed the water from Soot's back and climbed back onto his steed.

Jewel checked to be sure Colm and Soot were ready, then took off down the beach at a gallop, wet sand spraying behind her hooves. As she led Emma and her friends around the island's eastern shoreline, the beach grew narrower, and jagged bits of volcanic rock stuck up among the palm trees at its edge. Emma gasped when she and Wings rounded one particularly large outcropping and saw some pointy things rising from the sea. On closer look, they seemed to be a cluster of narrow towers topped with giant seashells.

Emma slowed Wings down a little and made room for Deru and Twig to move up beside them. "What are those?" she asked her friend, pointing at the spires. "They look like castle towers, but that can't be Islandar Castle—according to Tyri's map, that's way down in the Celestial Deep."

"I think it *is* Islandar Castle," said Deru, shading her eyes with a hand for a better look. "Like the tides, the castle moves with the moons, and the moons have been much closer together than usual lately, so their pull is extra strong. I didn't know they could pull the top of the castle clear out of the water, but that must be what happened."

Emma was still staring at the brightly colored towers when Wings's excited whinny brought her attention to the large flower growing on the beach across from the castle. Emma's heart leaped when Jewel eased them to a stop next to a pink and yellow flower whose single blossom was almost as big as her head. Reverently, the riders dismounted and they all formed a circle around the magical flower.

"The Ocean Hibiscus," Johan said quietly. "It's been a very long time since we planted this one, eh, Jewel?"

Jewel looked at Johan, and Emma got the feeling she was sending a mental image to him

alone. He smiled back at her. Then the legendary mare turned her gaze to Emma. Emma took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Jewel, for protecting the Ocean Hibiscus and for leading us to it," Emma said formally. "Now it is time for it to be a Sunstone petal again. May I pick it?"

As Fiona had done, Jewel sent Emma a mental image of her hands picking the flower. Emma followed Jewel's directions and the bloom came off into her hands, shining brighter and brighter until Emma had to look away. When the light faded, Emma looked back and saw another gold-edged cloisonné petal, this one faintly yellow. Grinning triumphantly, she held it up for the others to see, then carefully put it in her bag next to the pink one from the Desert Rose.

"Two petals down, three to go," said Colm, counting them off on his fingers. "Where to next, Johan?"

Johan stared at the Sunstone still pinned to Emma's vest. "Back the way we came," he

said finally. "We really need to go south as well as west. But even with Jewel's help we couldn't walk across the whole Equinesian Sea, and there's no way to get south by land until we get back to the Bluegrass Narrows."

Jewel shook her head and sent a mental image of them all following her across the water toward the spires of Islandar Castle.

"Thank you very much for the invitation, Jewel," said Emma. "But we have a long way to go, and we need to keep moving."

Jewel tossed her head impatiently and repeated

the image more forcefully. "Okay, I trust you," Emma told her. "We'll follow." She, Deru, and Johan mounted their steeds and rode out onto the water behind Jewel, while Soot and Colm circled slowly in the air above them.

To Emma's surprise, Jewel stopped just short of the closest tower. Then she stamped her foot sharply on the water, making a splash that sent Soot reeling backwards in the air to avoid it. Immediately, the water in front of them began roiling and bubbling. Then a matched pair of deep-blue merhorses with delicate, sea-green fins suddenly burst out of the water, followed by another pair and another and another. Emma barely had time to notice all eight were harnessed together before they pulled a large boat from the depths behind them. Water poured out of the boat in waves that nearly took Wings, Twig, and Cayenne off their feet.

Emma held her breath in astonishment. The boat looked like an enormous wooden canoe with a wide, flat deck. The point of its tall

prow was carved to look like the head of a horse, and its stern curled like the tail of a sea dragon. From the middle of the boat rose a mast whose single sail bore the gemstone crest of Herd Islandar. Toward the back sat what looked like a little house with a low, thatched roof. Gold paint on the side of the boat identified it as the *Island Jewel*.

As Emma stared at the boat, a large black raven flew down from the top of the mast and settled himself on the side of the boat closest to her. Instantly a gangplank slid out and floated on the water right in front of Emma and Wings.

"All aboard! All aboard!" croaked the raven hoarsely.

Emma's brain suddenly clicked back on and she turned to Jewel. "Is this your boat? Can it take us to the mainland?" she asked. Jewel nodded, looking proud of herself, and Emma blew the legendary mare a big kiss of thanks.

"Shake a leg! Shake a leg!" called the raven. "Cap'n's orders! Cap'n's orders!"

At Emma's urging, wide-eyed Wings climbed the gangplank and walked onto the deck, followed by Twig and Cayenne. Soot glided to one of his more graceful landings next to Wings, looking relieved to have something solid between him and the water. When they were all aboard, the riders dismounted and everyone waved goodbye to Jewel as the gangplank slid itself back up into the boat.

Emma looked around for the boat's crew but didn't see anyone on board except the raven, who flew to her shoulder. "Where is the captain?" she asked him cautiously.

"At yer service, at yer service," cawed the raven, puffing his chest feathers. "What's yer bearin'? What's yer bearin'?"

"My what?" asked Emma confusedly.

"Your bearing," said Johan. "He wants to know which way you want to go. Southwest, please, Captain. We'll probably want to dock at Midhaven."

"Sou'west, sou'west! Aye aye!" said

the raven. He flew out over the merhorses in front of the ship, bellowing, "Shove off! Shove off!"

In perfect harmony, the team of merhorses began swimming and the *Island Jewel* moved forward—slowly at first, then faster and faster. As the merhorses pulled the boat swiftly westward around the island, Emma and her friends moved to the front for a better view of the team. Emma noticed that the raven had perched on the carved horse head and was busy shouting things like "Four degrees port! Four degrees port!" and "Mind t'lee shore! Mind t'lee shore!" None of it made much sense to Emma, but the merhorses clearly knew how to follow the captain's orders. Once Emma even saw the sail adjust itself in response to his hollering.

When the *Island Jewel* reached the western side of the island and headed out to sea, Emma felt her stomach lurch and became keenly aware there wasn't anything in it. Colm poked her in the arm and whined, "I'm starving. Help me find

something to eat on this boat."

"Mess abaft t'cabin," croaked the raven. "Mess abaft t'cabin." When even Johan looked at him blankly, the raven rolled his eyes and pointed a wing at the back of the boat, behind the little house. There they found several barrels and crates of neatly packed food for people and horses: oats, dried papayas and bananas, thick crackers, firm yellow cheeses sealed in wax, and jars of plumberry jam. Near the crates, a heavy, shallow metal tub on short legs had a pile of hot coals burning inside of it. An iron kettle swinging over the coals contained something that simmered enticingly and smelled like seafood chowder.

"Lunch is served!" whooped Colm, grabbing a wooden bowl from the stack in one of the crates.

For the rest of that day and all of the next, the *Island Jewel* sailed through wide-open seas with no land in sight. At first Emma enjoyed the chance to relax, and Deru's many sea tales of

cranky, star-shaped electric sea stellies and impish glimmer eels kept her and Colm both laughing. But by bedtime on the second day, Emma had begun to miss riding and was almost as eager as Soot to be back on land. As she curled up in one of the hammocks hanging in the little house, she willed the boat to reach Midhaven by morning.

Emma got her wish. She woke when the raven called "Land ahoy! Land ahoy!" and almost fell out of her hammock in her rush to peer into the rosy dawn light and see for herself. By the time the boat sailed into the gentle waters of a narrow bay, she had everyone else up and packing their saddlebags. They finished getting ready just as the boat's mooring lines unreeled and secured themselves to a barnacle-crusted pier. Emma gave her thanks and farewells to the raven and his merhorse team, then rode Wings down the gangplank.

"Now this is more like it—almost a real city," said Colm as Soot stepped onto the pier next to Wings. "Bet you could buy almost any-

thing here." Emma looked around and decided he was right. Midhaven was nearly twice the size of Canter Hollow, with at least a dozen long piers dotted along its bustling bayside harbor. Fishing vessels, trading ships, and passenger boats all jostled for space, and even at this early hour the number of people and horses going to and fro between the harbor and the city rivaled the crowd at Bella's Ball.

"We're not here to go shopping," Johan reminded them gently. "Come on, this way."

Emma wished they did have time to stop at several of the little shops they passed, especially the one whose window showcased a gorgeous green wool riding suit trimmed with gold embroidery. But then a young woman selling newspapers on a streetcorner recognized Emma and cried, "It's her! Emma Rolanddotter!" Everyone on the street turned to stare at Emma.

"Sorry, I can't stop. Valkyrie business," said Emma quickly, giving them all a weak little wave and urging Wings to pick up his pace. Un-

der her breath she added, "Johan, can you get us out of here fast?"

"I'll try," Johan replied with a hint of a smile. Before the crowd could block them in, he and Cayenne quickly ducked onto a side street and led Emma and her friends on a zigzagging route that took them swiftly out of the busy business district and into the sleepier surrounding neighborhood. But Emma couldn't relax until they had passed the last of the city's many houses and come out into the surrounding farmland, where small cottages and barns were separated from the road by thickly planted orchards and wide green fields.

"One of these days," Colm told Emma as they rode, "you're going to have to figure out that being famous isn't some kind of curse."

"It is when you're in a hurry," insisted Emma, glancing nervously behind them. "Do we have to pass through any more big cities like that one?" she asked Johan.

"Well, this *is* the main road going west

from Midhaven," Johan replied. "None of the other cities will be as big as the port, but they won't all be tiny villages either."

"Is there any way we can go around them?" asked Emma worriedly. "Without losing much time, I mean?"

"There might be a way to do it that gains us time, if I recall correctly," said Johan, looking thoughtful. "But we have to reach one of the Grass Sea lakes first."

"The grassy lakes?" asked Colm confusedly.

"They're lakes in the Grass Sea," said Deru, pronouncing the name carefully. "That's what they call the plains here, because the grass grows on top of the sea."

"You're kidding me, right?" said Colm warily.

"No, it really does," confirmed Deru, draping a lock of Twig's long green mane over her hand to illustrate. "The grass and its roots grow in such dense tangles that you can walk right on top of them and never notice, but the

dirt layer beneath isn't very thick at all. Under that is a hidden sea, like the Equinesian Sea but colder and cloudier and greener, and fresh water instead of salt. In lots of places the grass layer hasn't grown over all of it, so there are pockets of water open to the air. People call them lakes, though they're really just the parts of the sea you can see." She giggled.

Deru's Grass Sea stories continued long enough that she was still going strong when Johan led them onto a side road edged with thick, yellow-green grass that grew almost as tall as Wings's shoulder. Minutes later, they reached the shore of a rippling lake big enough that Emma could well believe it was part of a larger sea. Johan dismounted, then took his hand shears from his bag and cut a length of hollow reed from a bunch growing at the lake's edge. Kneeling, he blew through the reed into the lake, sending up a mass of bubbles.

"What's that about?" asked Colm curiously.

"I'm calling some old friends of mine—

Sunflower horses who didn't go into hiding with the rest of the herd," said Johan as he stood back up. "If they're here, they'll want to help us."

The lake's surface bubbled and splashed, and then two green merstallions lifted their heads above the water and nickered in greeting. One had a greenish brown mane and a headdress decorated with a plume of cattails. The other had a silver mane and a headdress with a plume of reeds just like the one Johan had used.

"These are my friends, Cattail and Reed," said Johan, gesturing to the newcomers. "And this," he said to the water horses, "is Emma Roland, Sigga's heir, and her friends. We are looking for Herd Sunflower, and we need to cross the Grass Sea as quickly as possible. Can you help us?"

Both merstallions nodded and disappeared beneath the surface. When they came back up a few minutes later, they were harnessed together. Behind them they pulled a pair of enormous bubbles stuck together in the middle.

"Yay!" squealed Deru, clapping her hands. "I've always wanted to ride in a bubble coach! It's supposed to be the best way to see the Grass Sea from underneath."

"Is it… safe?" asked Emma. She glanced over at Soot, who stamped his feet nervously. "How will we breathe?"

"Oh, the bubbles are magic—they let in what they want and keep out what they want," explained Deru happily. "So they can let us in, and air for us to breathe, but keep out water and fish and other stuff. In fact, we'll be safer in there than we are now, because nothing bad can get at us in there. And we'll be faster, too, because no matter what's inside them, the bubbles stay as light as air."

Colm stroked Soot's neck reassuringly, but Emma could tell he wasn't too sure about the bubble coach. "Ladies first," he said.

"Why, thank you, Colm!" said Deru. "What a gentleman you are!" She dismounted smoothly, then calmly led Twig right through the

wall into the first bubble. Once inside, she waved excitedly to Emma and mouthed, "Come on!"

Emma followed Deru's lead, trying not to let her own nervousness disturb Wings, who seemed eager to try this fun new thing. Holding her breath and closing her eyes, Emma stepped off the shore and through the bubble wall, which felt a bit like walking through a damp, tissue-thin sponge. Inside, the air felt a little cooler and moister and the sunlight was slightly less bright, but everything else seemed perfectly normal. Wings jumped in after Emma, and he and Twig moved to the second bubble to make room as Johan and Cayenne entered next.

Emma worried that Soot would panic and burst into flame again, but whatever Colm said to him seemed to have soothed his nerves a little. He put one hoof into the bubble, then pulled it out and shook it. Then he put his nose in and paused, sniffing the air inside until he was satisfied enough to come the rest of the way in. When Colm came in after him, Soot relaxed a bit more,

and he and Cayenne joined the other horses in the second bubble.

Emma startled when the floor of their bubble began to move next to her feet. She jumped back and watched the bubble reshape itself to include four transparent, high-backed seats facing each other. She sat down gingerly on the nearest one and found that it was quite cushy and comfortable, with a velvety surface and arms at exactly the right height. In the bubble that held the horses, the walls formed stalls, two on each side.

"Pretty cool," said Colm, sitting down across from Emma and next to Deru. "All we need now is—"

Colm swallowed the rest of his sentence as Cattail and Reed dove and pulled the bubbles under the water after them. Emma's stomach lurched into her throat for a moment, but she eventually got used to the bubble coach's motion, which felt like a cross between the *Island Jewel* and a roller coaster. And its view of the Grass Sea was every bit as amazing as Deru predicted. For quite some

time they all stared in wonder through the clear walls of the bubble, watching fat neon frogs, little snail-like things, and all kinds of fish speed by in the murky green water. Every now and then beams of sunlight shone down from the "lakes" above like bright trees in an undersea forest.

"As I was gonna say," Colm said eventually, breaking the silence, "all we need now is lunch."

"Don't worry," said Johan. "I've still got plenty of cheese, crackers, and fruit in my pack."

As they ate, Emma said, "I've been thinking…"

"Uh oh," said Colm impishly.

Deru quickly shut him up by stuffing more crackers in his mouth. "Go on," she encouraged.

"Well, so far both of the Sunstone petals have been in plants growing near the castles of legendary horses. Fiona helped us with the first one and Jewel with the second," said Emma.

"So you think we'll find the next two near the homes of Thunder and Nike?" said Johan thoughtfully. "I honestly can't remember if that's where I hid them, but it seems like something I'd do. And if the Sunstone keeps pointing us due west, we *will* eventually end up in the Midwinter Mountains, where Thunder lives."

"How can a flower grow up there in all that snow and ice?" asked Colm doubtfully.

"I know!" said Deru, her face brightening. "I bet it grows under the Everspring Pines. There's a whole forest of them up there, and it's always springtime beneath their branches."

"She's right," said Johan. "If the next Sunstone flower is up there, that's where it'll be."

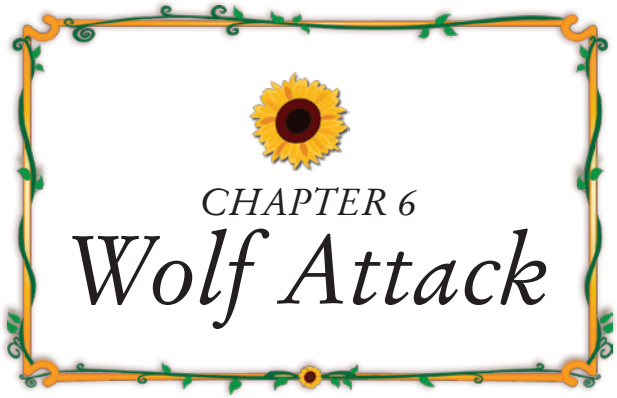
"But if we can figure that out, so can Ivenna," said Colm. "And dark, wintry mountains sound like just her sort of place."

Emma suddenly found it hard to breathe. "Do you think Ivenna knows where we're going? What if she gets there first?" she asked in a voice pitched higher than usual.

"Nothing we can do now but get there as fast as we can and be prepared for whatever might happen," said Johan quietly.

That was not the answer Emma wanted to hear.

Next chapter... meet Thunder!



CHAPTER 6

Wolf Attack

As the merstallions Cattail and Reed pulled the bubble coach swiftly through the Grass Sea, Deru happily told stories about the strange sights and underwater creatures they passed. Colm and Johan seemed to enjoy listening, but Emma didn't really hear any of it. She was busy coming up with a plan in case Ivenna got to the next petal before they did. Could they steal it from her? Fight her for it? Trick her into giving it up? None of Emma's ideas seemed very likely. When night came and the water outside darkened from murky green to black, she gave up. Letting her body sink back into the pillowy softness of her seat, she tried to get some sleep. But mixed-up nightmares of Ivenna and flowers and wolves kept her tossing and turning for hours.

Emma woke with a start when Wings nuzzled her shoulder. Groggily, she looked through the clear bubble walls and noticed four things. One, the sun was up and well above the horizon. Two, the bubble coach had stopped by the shore of a small, grass-edged lake. Three, Cattail and Reed weren't harnessed to the front anymore. And four, none of her friends were inside!

Before Emma could panic, Wings gave her a laughing sort of nicker and pointed his nose at the shore. She looked more closely and saw Deru and Colm sitting in the tall grass at the lake's edge, eating apples and giggling about something. Emma realized with deep embarrassment

that she must have overslept, and she hurried to join her friends. As she and Wings stepped out of the bubble coach, she felt its thin wall pop. The coach had disappeared, leaving only ripples on the lake.

"Finally," said Colm as Emma sat down in the grass beside Deru. "If you weren't up before Johan got back, I was going to eat your breakfast." He tossed her a travel-bruised apple.

"Where did Johan go?" Emma asked Deru, ignoring her cousin.

"There's a town a little way north—Lowton, I think he called it," said Deru. "We were *all* worried when you didn't get up as early as usual," she added with a significant look at Colm. "But Johan said he needed to get us some food and cold-weather gear anyway so you might as well sleep in a little."

"Oh," said Emma. She had been so busy worrying about wolves that she had forgotten to worry about the Midwinter Mountains' harsh weather. "I guess we'll need that."

"No duh," said Colm around a mouthful of apple. "Of course, Soot puts out enough heat to keep both of *us* nice and toasty. But *you'll* need something warm for sure."

"I expect we will all be glad of warmer things before long," said Johan, coming up behind them. Colm jumped in surprise and accidentally dropped the last of his apple in the lake.

Johan carried a big, cloth-wrapped bundle in his arms. "Ooh, what all did you get?" asked Deru eagerly. She sprang to her feet and started helping Johan undo the bundle. Emma and Colm got up to look too.

"Fur-lined leather coats for all of us, and thick blankets for the horses," said Johan. He and Deru sorted his purchases into neat stacks on the grass. "Wool socks and mittens and long johns, for those of us who can't grow our own. And I probably paid too much for them, but I got a couple dozen fresh heatstones as well." He unscrewed the lid of a ceramic jar to display several cloth-wrapped stones about the size of eggs.

"What's a heatstone?" asked Colm. He picked up one of the stones and started to unwrap it.

"Careful with that!" cried Deru, grabbing Colm's wrist. She gently took the heatstone from him and put it back with the others. "Heatstones are special rocks mined deep within the Midwinter Mountains, where the lava rivers flow," she

said. "They absorb so much heat from the lava that they stay hot for months—sometimes even years. Then the miners throw them back and let them get hot all over again."

"Is it safe to carry them around?" asked Emma.

"As long as we leave them wrapped," said Johan. He looked sternly at Colm, who held up his empty hands innocently. "When we get up a little higher we'll stuff them in our pockets for extra warmth," Johan added. "But we don't want to unwrap them unless we need burning heat, like for cooking."

"Got it," said Emma with a brisk nod. "Now let's get this stuff on and start climbing those mountains!"

Though the horses galloped as swiftly as ever, it seemed to take forever to get through the lowland woods. When they reached the foothills and finally started to climb, Emma had to put up the hood of her new brown leather coat against a drizzly rain. The pine trees along the road looked

like toothbrushes, with their bare trunks stretching high above her head before sprouting masses of bristly needles. The road was so buried in pine needles that the horses' hooves made an echoing *thump-thump* sound.

After lunch it began to snow, lightly but steadily. The trees on the hillside became fewer and shorter, with bare boulders and wide-open clearings in between. As the mountain got steeper, the road took more and more zigzagging switchbacks. Emma, eager to reach the next petal, wished they could cut a few of the corners and go up more directly. But watching a pair of light-footed deer cause a minor rockslide as they scrambled up the icy slope cured her of that idea.

Johan stopped them for the night when the snowfall got really thick. "It's not quite sunset yet, but we can't risk getting caught in a blizzard in the dark," he explained. They all dismounted and looked around at the snowflakes swirling everywhere. Already it was getting hard to see very

far on the bleak, frozen mountainside.

"Where are we gonna sleep?" asked Colm disbelievingly. "There's no shelter here, and this wind'll blow that lame tent of yours clean over."

"I'm hoping our dryad friends can help us with that," said Johan. He pulled a rainbow-colored pinecone from his bag and handed it to Deru. "Can you and Twig make this grow here?"

"Everspring Pines don't usually grow on this side of the Midwinters," said Deru thoughtfully. "The west side has more of the underground hot springs they tap into to get their warmth. But we might be able to make do temporarily with a few heatstones—if we can get the ground warm enough to dig in."

Soot nickered and took a step toward Deru. "Just leave that to us," said Colm. "Where do you want it?"

Deru chose a spot a little way off the road, where the ground was almost flat and a couple of short pines blocked the worst of the wind. Colm kicked the snow off it with his boots. Then Soot

lay down and rolled back and forth on the frozen grass beneath, his black coat brightening to orange like a hot coal someone just blew on. When he got up, the ground was black with soot but thawed enough for Johan to dig a small hole with his trowel.

Johan carefully unwrapped six of the precious heatstones, which flickered with fiery colors. He put them in the bottom of the hole, covered them with earth loam, put the pinecone on top of that, added more earth loam, and refilled the rest of the hole with regular dirt. "Now it's up to you, my dears," he told Deru and Twig.

Deru knelt and laid her right hand on the little mound of dirt. "Grow," she whispered. Then she stood up and said, "Grow" again, a bit louder. "Grow!" she repeated, hopping in the air with her hood flying and her arms waving madly. "GROW!" she shouted, jumping as high as she could while Twig reared next to her.

Suddenly, a little green shoot popped up from the center of the mound. As Twig and Deru

danced around it, it grew taller and thicker and began to sprout branches and needles. Before long, an enormous Everspring Pine stood before them. Its trunk was so thick Emma didn't think she and Deru together could get their arms around it, and its branches were broad enough to shelter them all. Underneath the tree a gentle breeze blew over patches of green moss spreading out into a soft carpet. Dozens of tiny yellow, orange, and red wildflowers opened their petals to the gentle, golden light shining down from its branches.

"You did it!" whooped Emma, throwing her arms around her best friend in a congratulatory hug.

"Way to go, Deru!" said Colm. Emma expected him to follow up with some smart-aleck remark, but he just grinned and gave Deru a quick hug. Deru beamed back at him. *Maybe Colm can be nice to someone other than Soot,* thought Emma with some surprise.

"Don't forget Twig," said Deru. She kissed

her steed's nose and stroked her neck.

"Of course not," said Emma, giving Twig a hug too. "Now both of you sit under your tree and rest, and we'll fix you something warm to eat."

When their bellies were full of comforting stew, Emma leaned against the tree next to Deru, hoping for a little girl talk. But Colm interrupted them.

"So what are we gonna do if Ivenna tries to take the next petal?" he asked, flopping down on the other side of Deru. "I know Johan said 'Be prepared' and all, but that's not exactly a plan."

"Emma will know what to do," said Deru sleepily.

"I wish I did, but I haven't been able to think of anything good," confessed Emma.

"I have faith in you," said Deru. "When the time comes, you will know."

"What makes you think that?" asked Emma with a nervous laugh.

"You are Sigga's heir," said Deru. She

smiled at them as if that explained everything.

"So? That doesn't make her any smarter," said Colm.

Emma glared at Colm, then sighed. "Even I don't know how that helps," she said. "I know I'm supposed to become a Valkyrie, and find the lost horses, and reunite all the great herds. What I don't know is how. You and Tyri and everybody else expect . . . expect . . ."

"All we expect is that you be yourself," said Deru, squeezing Emma's hand. "You're already plenty smart, you work hard, and you care a lot about doing the right thing—those are all Valkyrie traits, you know. You don't have to have all the answers ahead of time. When trouble comes, Valkyries think things through and find a way past it. So will you."

Before going to sleep, Emma took a moment to write in her Ballad journal:

I hope Deru is right that I'll know what to do before it's too late. Maybe I'm getting ahead

of myself worrying about what might happen. I guess we'll find out soon enough.

When Emma woke the next day the snow had stopped, but everything outside the shelter of the Everspring Pine was white with snow. Despite the fur lining of her coat, Emma couldn't help shivering as she and her friends stepped away from the tree and mounted their steeds. Then they had to wait a couple of minutes while Johan looked for the road under snow so deep it came halfway to the horses' knees. Even standing still, Emma found it hard to breathe properly in the thin, icy air. When they finally started off, she looked back at the Everspring Pine, standing so tall and full of life in the middle of the empty tundra. She hoped it would make things easier for others traveling this road.

With the road hidden under the snow, it was hard to see, so the group rode slowly up the mountainside, careful not to stray off course. The cold got even worse as the road climbed higher.

Emma tried to distract herself by looking around, but the few trees that grew this far up were so stunted and windblown that she could hardly tell them from rocks beneath all that snow. Once she thought she saw the snow move, but it turned out to be a little animal like a fat, tailless squirrel with big, brown eyes. Emma stared at it, wondering what it was, but it just stared right back.

"You look cold, Em," called out Colm from behind her. Startled, Emma turned and saw that Soot's fiery warmth was making the air shimmer around him. Colm's face was flushed even though he had his coat open and his hood pushed back.

"Thanks for the reminder," said Emma.

"No— I mean, I was gonna ask if you wanted to trade horses for a while," said Colm. "Just to get warm."

"No, thanks," said Emma, hoping he couldn't hear her teeth chattering. "Wings is a Valkyrie steed. Not just anybody can ride him."

"That's not— Oh, whatever," said Colm

sullenly. "Forget it."

After a while the road began to level out, and Emma could see a large, snow-topped gray shape next to the road in the distance.

"What's that?" Emma asked Johan, pointing at the shape.

"It looks like a boathouse," said Johan. His voice sounded relieved. "That means we're almost to the shore of Wintermere, the largest lake in all of North of North. It's frozen solid, but iceboats still sail on it. With wind this strong, catching one of those would take us across faster than riding, and it'd give the horses a chance to rest after their long climb."

A few minutes later, Emma and her friends arrived at the stone boathouse. It had a steeply pointed roof, a few tightly shuttered windows, and three chimneys: one on each end and one in the middle. Next to the boathouse sat a snow-covered pier that stuck out over a flat, open space Emma figured must be the frozen lake under a blanket of snow. Another craggy, white moun-

tain rose from a huge island in the center of the lake and blocked Emma's view forward. But the way the shoreline stretched from side to side made her agree with Johan that Wintermere must be truly vast.

"How do we call for an iceboat?" Emma asked, raising her voice to be heard over the wind.

"I think one is already on the way," Johan replied, pointing into the sky. Emma looked up and saw a sleek blue-black stallion with matching feathered wings gliding toward the boathouse. "That looks like a guide horse," said Johan. "The big ice schooners use them to help them find the best winds."

Sure enough, a pale blue boat every bit as big as the *Island Jewel* soon rounded the island in the middle of the lake and headed for the pier. Like Jewel's boat, it had a prow carved in the shape of a horse's head. But instead of one big, square sail, it had four triangular ones billowing from a single mast. Three long runners, like gi-

ant ice-skate blades, supported its hull. As the iceboat got closer, Emma could see that even its runners and railings were carved in elaborately twining patterns. Whatever it was made out of was as smooth and glossy as ice itself.

A handful of sailors in fur caps, short black coats, striped pants, and tall boots swarmed over the boat. They tugged on ropes and hollered strange words at each other much like the raven on the *Island Jewel*. As the guide horse landed nearby, the sailors pulled the iceboat smoothly up to the pier and tied it down with practiced speed. Then a red-cheeked gentleman with a neatly trimmed brown mustache and goatee stepped out of the boat. He walked briskly toward where Emma and her friends waited, shivering in the bitter cold. From the spotless gold trim on his three-cornered hat to the shiny rows of brass buttons on his matching navy-blue tailcoat, he looked as perfect as a painting.

"You must be Emma Roland, yes?" asked the man in a voice as smooth and refined as a no-

bleman's. When Emma nodded, he swept off his hat and gave her a deep, courtly bow. "My name is Captain Frisko, our guide stallion is Tramontane, and this is the ice schooner *Frostskimmer.* Thunder requested that we bring you and your companions to Valeryk Castle as swiftly as possible, if it please you."

Thunder! thought Emma with a sudden burst of hope. *He's the bravest of all the legendary horses.* He'll make sure the petal stays safe until we get there. "Yes, thank you very much," she told Captain Frisko. "We're grateful for your help."

"It is always a pleasure to serve one of the Valkyrie Sisterhood," said the captain, replacing his hat. "Now, if you are ready to depart, please come aboard."

Emma and her friends dismounted and led their steeds through the snow onto the *Frostskimmer.* When all were aboard, Captain Frisko nodded to one of the sailors, who took a brass whistle out of her pocket and blew a series of

notes. Instantly, Tramontane leaped back into the air and the rest of the crew began scrambling and hollering to get the iceboat underway. Then the captain offered Emma his arm and guided her toward the back of the boat, with Wings and her friends following closely behind. They stopped near the stern, where a copper kettle bubbled over a tub of hot coals. A plump, middle-aged woman with reddish curls and a crisp white apron presided over it.

"I'm afraid I must return to my duties now, but Dordi here will help you get settled and take care of anything you may need," said Captain Frisko. He gave Emma another quick bow before heading back toward the front.

Dordi wasn't much of a talker, but she did know her business. Before long she had the horses eating oats laced with molasses and their riders seated on benches with fur blankets to snuggle up in. Then she served up big, steaming bowls of chicken soup with carrots, peas, and chewy dumplings.

"Man, this is good," said Colm as he finished his third helping. "Just what we needed after climbing the tallest mountain in the world."

"Not quite the tallest," said Johan, using his spoon to point past Colm's shoulder to the mountain on the island in the middle of the frozen lake.

"What's that one called?" asked Emma. "I've never been up here before, but it looks familiar somehow."

"That's Thunder Peak," said Deru. "It hasn't erupted in quite a while, but it steams a bit, and it always has a crown of clouds."

Wings looked up from his oats and sent Emma a private mental image of a shining white citadel with blue-roofed towers floating on a bank of clouds. *Hestheim,* she thought, immediately recognizing the home of the Valkyries. *So that's where it is.* Tyri had told her only Valkyrie steeds could find the hidden citadel—even the Valkyries themselves couldn't get there without their steeds. Emma smiled at Wings for letting her in on the secret.

The rest of the day passed quickly as the *Frostskimmer* sped across Wintermere. Of all the ways they had traveled on this long journey, Emma liked riding the best, but ice-sailing definitely came in second. Something about the smooth *skshh* sound of the runners on the ice and the way the landscape whipped by in the wind reminded her of flying on Wings. Emma still wondered why anyone would choose to live where it stayed winter all the time. But then she spotted the ice-blue towers of Valeryk Castle rising in front of the sunset. She had to admit its onion-shaped domes and twinkling lights did look beautifully warm and inviting.

Maybe we can spend the night at the castle after we get the petal, thought Emma hopefully. I bet Thunder will invite us.

When the *Frostskimmer* pulled up to the dock in front of Valeryk Castle, Emma was delighted to see that Thunder himself had come to meet them. She and her friends gave their thanks

to Dordi, Tramontane, Captain Frisko, and the rest of the crew, then hurried to greet the legendary black stallion.

But the sober look on Thunder's face turned Emma's glad hello into a worried, "Thunder! What's wrong?"

Thunder's mental image of wolf tracks in the snow sent a chill down Emma's spine.

"Are the wolves here already? Did they get the petal?" asked Emma quickly, her voice rising with fear.

Thunder shook his head, and Emma's chest loosened a little. Then he sent a mental image of a map. It showed a picture of Valeryk Castle marked on one spot, a white flower marked near the closest side of a nearby forest, and a wolf print marked on the far side.

"So, looks like the wolves are barking up the wrong trees," said Colm with a smirk.

"This isn't funny, Colm," snapped Emma. "They're really close. Thunder, please, take us to

the flower as fast as you can."

With a toss of his long black mane, Thunder turned and galloped off into the snow. As they followed him up a ridge and into a whole forest of Everspring Pines, Emma barely noticed the magical beauty and warmth all around her. She was too busy hoping with all her might that they would get to the petal first. *Now would be*

a good time for me to suddenly come up with a plan, she thought.

Finally, Thunder slowed a little as they came out of the trees and into a broad clearing where the snow lay thick on the ground. Rising at least four or five feet from a drift in the center of the clearing was a huge, bell-shaped flower whose three white petals sparkled with frost.

"That's it—the Winter Snowdrop!" cried Johan.

Emma opened her mouth to ask Thunder how to pick it, but just then a red-furred wolf burst from the trees on the opposite side of the clearing with a whole pack of his gray brothers at his heels. Emma froze in terror when she saw behind the wolves the very thing she'd been dreading: Ivenna herself, riding a monstrous gray and black wolf far too large to be natural.

"Myrfor—the flower!" Ivenna commanded. Her wolf mount leaped toward the Winter Snowdrop as Thunder reared, screaming in challenge. A bright bolt of lightning shot from

Thunder's hooves, but Ivenna blocked it with her staff, making it fork into smaller bolts that swirled around her and Myrfor like a cage.

"*Get that flower!*" Ivenna screamed as Thunder charged toward her. The red-furred wolf and a handful of others broke from the pack and raced toward the snowdrop while the rest moved to defend their mistress.

Suddenly, Emma did know exactly what to do. She gave Wings a quick squeeze with her legs, then leaned forward as he launched into the air and flew straight toward the flower. Riding as low as she could, Emma positioned herself to reach down and pluck the flower from its tall stem.

But Emma's hesitation had given the wolves too much of a head start. She watched in horror as the red-furred wolf slid to a snow-spraying stop next to the flower and locked onto the base of its stem with his fearsome jaws. His companions howled in triumph, and Emma nearly burst into tears. All of her nightmares were coming true,

and she felt powerless to stop them.

Then a booming crash of thunder sent a sudden wave of courage flooding through Emma's heart. At her whisper, Wings swooped down and landed right in the middle of the celebrating wolves, startling and temporarily scattering all of the gray ones. But the red wolf stood his ground, growling deep in his throat and ripping the magical flower's thick stem from the snow. Before he could run off with it, Emma lunged for the blossom. She felt its petals crushing in the strength of her grip, then a snap as the Winter Snowdrop came off of its stem.

YES! thought Emma as bright white light shot from between her fingers, and she closed her eyes to avoid being blinded. She could still hear the wolves' surprised yipes and feel the flower changing to a Sunstone petal in her grasp. Just as

Wings launched into the air, she felt sharp teeth tearing through the skin on the back of her hand, but the badly aimed bite couldn't sink in enough to grab her. She held fast to the petal as she and Wings flew high, beyond the wolves' reach.

Ignoring the sharp pain in her hand, Emma opened her eyes and stuffed the petal into her bag, looking down to see if Thunder and her friends were all right. She spotted Twig and Deru safely in the air above the far side of the clearing. Beneath them, Cayenne and Johan were busy pepper-spraying a small group of wolves who were chasing them.

Closer by, Thunder and Ivenna were fighting an epic duel. Thunder's hooves sent out streak after streak of lightning, and Ivenna's staff countered with dark-red bolts of sorcerous magic. The rest of Ivenna's wolf pack tried to surround Thunder, but a brightly flaming horse and rider protected the legendary stallion's back, spitting fire at any wolf who came too close. Emma had to look twice before she could believe it was Soot

and Colm! *I guess I'm not the only one who's braver when Thunder is around, she thought in wonder.*

As if he could tell she was thinking about him, Thunder looked up and saw Emma and Wings. Emma nodded and patted her bag to show she had the petal. Thunder reared and shot a particularly bright ball of lightning at Ivenna, then looked back at Emma and sent her a mental image. It was the same map he had shown her before, but now a trail of blue horseshoes led away from the forest into the western Midwinter Mountains. At the other end of the trail was a picture of a narrow cave mouth half hidden by overhanging icicles.

Thunder's showing us a safe hiding place, thought Emma. She looked back at her friends to be sure they got the message. Johan nodded at her as Cayenne broke away from the wolves and popped *into* one of the nearby trees, just as she had done back in the Emeraldian Wilds. Twig hovered and waited while Deru hurriedly

gestured for Emma to join them. But Colm and Soot, still fighting off the wolf pack, made no move to leave.

At a whisper from Emma, Wings flew swiftly to meet Twig and Deru in midair. "Take this—it's got the petals," Emma said, passing her bag carefully to Deru and wincing as the movement made her injured hand throb. "Make sure Johan and Cayenne make it to Thunder's cave. I'm going back for Colm, and then we'll meet you there."

"Be careful," said Deru, looking worriedly at Emma's bleeding hand.

"You too," said Emma. Then she took a deep breath and sent Wings flying back toward Colm and Soot.

When Thunder saw Emma coming back, he shook his head and repeated his mental image of the map with the cave mouth. But Emma and Wings kept going until they were hovering over Colm's head, just within shouting distance.

"Colm! Come on, we have to go!" said

Emma.

"You go! Thunder needs us!" yelled Colm as Soot sent a burst of flame at a wolf that tried to sneak past him.

"Thunder *told* us to go!" shouted Emma angrily. "Now come on!"

Ivenna pointed her staff at Emma and shot out a wicked-looking bolt of red magic. Thunder reared and managed to block it with his shoulder, but he squealed with pain and came down awkwardly.

"I can't leave Thunder now!" Colm yelled as Soot wheeled to put himself between Thunder and the nearest wolf. "Go without me!"

Thunder blasted out a mental image of Emma and Colm flying away, sending it with so much force that Emma felt almost like she'd been slapped. But Colm and Soot stubbornly fought on.

All the grief Colm had ever given Emma came back to her and filled her voice with righteous fury as she bellowed, "Malcolm Connor

Roland! If you don't come with me right now, I'll . . . I'll send you back to Earth!"

"You wouldn't!" cried Colm. Horrified, he stared up at Emma for the first time. She glared fiercely back. Then Colm, with a wordless snarl of rage, squeezed Soot with his legs and sent him rocketing into the air past Emma in the direction Thunder had shown them.

Emma urged Wings to follow just in time to dodge another bolt from Ivenna's staff. When they left the clearing and flew out over the forest, Emma looked back one last time and saw the wolf pack closing in on Thunder. The legendary stallion's entire body crackled with electricity. Then a sudden, massive storm cloud swept in to block Emma's view, and she turned her face forward into the icy wind as she and her steed sped away.

That cloud was the first sign of a gathering storm that tested Emma's riding skills. Gusting winds and crashing thunder shook the air and shoved Wings up, down, and sideways as

he flew. Emma was secretly glad they had Soot's fiery light to follow as they struggled through near-blinding snow and lightning. As it was, she didn't spot the cave mouth in the dark until Colm brought Soot in for a landing right in front of it. By that time, she was too tired to care that they'd be spending the night in a cold, rough cave instead of the comfort of Valeryk Castle.

But when they dismounted and led the horses inside, Emma found herself in a smooth-walled stone hallway someone had deliberately carved into the mountainside. Colm threw open the heavy wooden door at the end of the hall and revealed a large room with a pit full of heatstones at its center. Johan sat stirring his camp pot over the warm, flickering glow. Along the walls, little nests of furs and blankets promised a comfortable place to sleep. Deru inspected shelves stocked with a variety of jars and boxes. The back of the room even had a straw-lined stable area for the horses, where Twig and Cayenne rested peacefully.

Without speaking to anyone, Colm yanked off his coat, dropped it on the floor, and stalked off to the stable area with Soot. Deru took one look at his face and ran after him, murmuring anxiously. Emma sighed and started to help Wings out of his wet gear. But when she tried to grasp the edge of his blanket, the pain in her injured hand made her gasp. She looked at her hand for the first time and was surprised to see it had bled enough to stain the cuff of her coat.

"You're hurt," said Johan, rushing over from his spot by the heatstone pit. "Let me take a look at that."

"It's not as bad as it looks," said Emma, holding her hand out to Johan. "One of the wolves tried to bite me, but it didn't really get ahold of me."

"Even minor wolf bites can turn nasty quickly," said Johan. "Wings, can you wait a moment while I take care of Emma?"

Wings nodded enthusiastically, so Emma gingerly pulled off her coat and sat down by the

heatstone pit while Johan got a couple of little jars from his bag. First he soaked some cloth in a liquid that smelled like flowers. He used it to gently clean out the shallow red gashes on Emma's hand. Next he spread the wounds with a thick ointment that felt cold and tingly but also made her hand hurt a lot less. Finally, he wrapped the whole thing in a clean bandage.

"So what is that you put on there?" asked Emma, cautiously flexing her fingers. "It feels better already."

"I washed it out with essence of haleflower—a magical plant that speeds healing," said Johan as he put his jars back in his bag. "The salve has pain-numbing herbs, plus wolf-whistle leaves to prevent the infections that often come with wolf bites. I think you'll be okay now, but do let me know if it starts hurting again or if you feel feverish."

"Thanks, I will," said Emma. She started to get up, but Johan put his hand on her shoulder.

"You rest that hand," said Johan. "I'll take

care of Wings for you."

"Thanks again," said Emma. She spotted her bag sitting nearby and used her good hand to fish around inside for the Sunstone petals. The first two she found felt just as she remembered, but the third one felt . . . wrong. Emma pulled it out quickly and breathed a horrified "No!" when she saw that the golden edge of the pale blue cloisonné petal was oddly twisted right where it was supposed to attach to the Sunstone.

"What's the matter?" asked Johan. He stopped taking off Wings's gear and came over to sit beside Emma.

"I broke it," whispered Emma in shocked disbelief. "I didn't pick it right, and I broke it!"

Johan put a comforting arm around Emma's shoulders. "It is bent a bit, but I don't think it's actually broken," he said, looking at the misshapen petal in Emma's palm. "We might be able to fix it. Or it might fix itself when it gets next to all the others."

"Do you really think so?" asked Emma,

looking up at Johan. "I couldn't bear it if I ruined the petal when Thunder's back there fighting Ivenna's whole pack all by himself just so we could keep it safe."

"Don't worry too much about Thunder," said Johan with a wry smile. "He's dealt with Ivenna before. Without us in the way, he can really let her have it. Didn't you notice the terrible storm building out there? All that snow and wind and lightning was just a taste of what he's blasting at Ivenna right now."

"I hope so," said Emma. She smiled at the image of a wet, shivering Ivenna trying to dodge Thunder's lightning bolts.

Johan went back to Wings, and Emma put the bent petal back in her bag. When she looked up, she saw Deru coming over to the heatstone pit with an unusually serious look on her face."Emma, I think you need to talk to Colm," Deru said as she sat down beside her friend. "He's really upset.""That's his problem," said Emma. "He always has a temper tantrum when

he doesn't get to do what he wants."

"This is different," said Deru. She hesitated, then added, "He says you were going to send him back to Earth."

"I only said that to make him listen to me for once," said Emma.

"Well, he thinks you meant it," said Deru. "Did you?"

Yes, thought Emma fiercely. But thinking of Earth reminded her that she and Colm were the only ones in North of North who grew up there. Without him, no one would share her memories of stuff like goofy monster movies and Fourth of July parades and Day Mare Ranch—and her parents. *No,* she thought. *He's a brat, but he's the only family I've got anymore.*

"Okay, I'll talk to him," sighed Emma. She dragged herself to the stable area, where Colm was briskly brushing the soot from his steed's coat. His face a blank mask, he pretended not to notice her.

Emma took a deep breath and said, "Colm,

listen—"

"No," said Colm flatly. "I'm done listening to you. Find somebody else to boss around." He moved to Soot's other side and started brushing again.

"I just want to say I'm sorry," Emma said. She took a deep breath, trying not to show how annoyed she was. "I know how you feel about leaving Thunder—"

"No, you don't," said Colm, still not looking at her.

"Colm—"

"You don't!" he interrupted. "You think we had to leave to keep the stupid petals safe. Maybe you're right—ever since we came to Magic Emma Land, whatever you think is always right. But even if you were wrong, you'd send me back to Earth anyway. Otherwise somebody might get the idea I'm good for something."

"That's not true!" cried Emma, stung by the bitterness in Colm's voice.x"Please," said Colm sarcastically. "I was mean to you back on

Earth, and I've got some payback coming to me. I get it." Colm stopped brushing and glared hotly at Emma. "But I'm as smart as you are, and as strong as you are, and as good a rider as you are. I'm *helping* you, even if nobody but Deru believes it. And you do *not* get to take that away from me. It's not right."

"I was just trying to get your attention," said Emma, taking a couple of shaky steps backwards.

"You're the one who's not paying attention," said Colm, his face flushed with fury. "You've never once noticed that you're not the only Roland saving the world around here. Soot and I risked our lives to protect Thunder tonight. The one time I do a truly brave thing, all you care about is that it wasn't what you told me to do."

Colm turned away and buried his face in Soot's neck. He didn't make any noise, but the way his shoulders trembled made Emma think he was crying.

"I'm sorry," whispered Emma. "I really am. You guys *were* really brave, and I'm glad you're helping. . . ." She longed to say something that would make things right, but words failed her and all she could do was look pleadingly at Soot. Soot looked back at her and gently shook his head.

Tears in her eyes, Emma stumbled away to curl up next to Wings. As her worried steed softly nuzzled her hair, she cried herself to sleep.

Next chapter... meet Nike!

CHAPTER 7

Skylands

Sometime in the middle of the night, Emma felt something change. For a few moments she just sat there next to Wings, gazing at the shadows the glowing heatstones cast on the stone walls of Thunder's hideaway and trying to figure out why she was awake. Then she realized what it was: She couldn't hear the howl of the storm anymore. Hope that means Thunder drove the wolves away, she thought. Better look and see. Quietly, so as not to disturb the others, Emma found her coat and slipped out the door into the cave mouth for a look around.

Though the storm had stopped, Emma could tell Thunder hadn't held back. Vast, heaping mounds of moon-bright snow, many with fallen trees and branches sticking up out of them, seemed to cover the whole world. The cave itself was protected by a stone ledge that sheltered its mouth, but Emma couldn't get more than a few feet away from it. After that the drifts piled up past her waist, and farther on they were even deeper. One thing's for sure, she thought: Ivenna and the wolves are definitely long gone or in over their heads. Comforted by the thought, Emma went back inside and let the steady rhythm of Wings's breathing lull her back to sleep.

In the morning, Emma realized something else had changed too: Her hand didn't hurt anymore. She took off her bandage and saw that the red gashes Johan had treated last night had faded to nothing more than shiny, pale pink scars.

They itched a little when she moved but otherwise seemed fully healed. Haleflower and—what was it? Wolf-whistle leaves, she thought. I have to remember that stuff.

Emma got up and walked over to the heatstone pit, where she found Johan fixing their usual oatmeal. "How's the hand?" he asked.

"All better, thanks to you," said Emma, holding it up for him to see. "But we've got a new problem now. Thunder's storm dumped so much snow out there, I'm not sure how we're going to get out without flying."

"This place seems pretty well stocked," said Johan. "Go poke around in the stable area and see if you can find any horse snowshoes."

"I've never heard of horse snowshoes!" said Emma. "What do they look like?"

"They'll be circles about this big across," said Johan, holding up his hands a foot apart. "Bent wooden sticks tied together at the edges, with X-shaped crosspieces in the middle and leather straps to keep them on."

Emma had to search through several boxes and trunks of gear, and she woke the horses and Deru in the process. But she did find four sets of horse snowshoes by the time breakfast was ready.

"Will we really need those?" Deru asked Johan as they ate. "Surely Thunder will have the Shedderpup Patrol out by now." To Emma she added, "Their thick fur keeps them so warm they'll have the snow melted off the roads in no time."

"That's exactly why I don't want to go on the main roads," said Johan. "If any of Ivenna's spies are still lurking around here, that's where they'll be watching. But if we go south instead of west, we can follow the shores of Wintermere down to Whitemantle Glacier. Then we'll go down alongside the glacier to get out of the Midwinter Mountains."

"And the bottom of Whitemantle Glacier is almost right under the Windhome Skylands, the floating islands where Nike and Herd Airis-

tos live," said Deru, catching onto Johan's plan.

"I'm sure we'll find the next petal near Airistos Castle," said Emma. "At least we know the wolves can't follow us up there!"

"Unless they use the Shadow Path," said Colm, coming up from behind them. Emma couldn't help noticing that he sat down on the far side of the heatstone pit. She tried to catch his eye, but he avoided looking anywhere near her. I hope he's not still mad at me from last night, she thought.

"I can't believe they'd dare come after us again so soon," said Deru. "Especially after all the punishment they just took from Soot and Thunder."

"Maybe not." Colm smiled at Deru, then dared a glance at Emma. Emma smiled back, but Colm quickly looked away again with an unreadable expression on his face.

Emma sighed. "Well, either way, we'd better get moving," she said. "Johan, how exactly do we get these snowshoes on the horses?"

Johan taught them how to work the snowshoes by demonstrating on Cayenne. Then he and Cayenne went to scout the best way out while Emma, Colm, and Deru prepared their steeds. Before long all the horses were ready to try walking on snowshoes.

"Cayenne has used snowshoes before," said Johan. "Just follow her and do as she does."

With light, steady steps, Cayenne climbed up onto the snowdrift Emma had tried to wade through during the night. Eager to go next, Wings followed too quickly. He slid a little, then tried to leap the rest of the way onto the drift. He snorted and Emma yelped when they sank into the snow almost up to Wings's belly.

"Easy there, young fellow!" said Johan. "You have to move smoothly. Don't come down too hard." Sheepishly, Wings worked his way back onto the drift and shuffled forward behind Cayenne. Twig followed, picking her way carefully around the holes Wings had made in the deep snow.

Soot came along far more readily than Emma expected, and quickly mastered the proper gait. But they didn't get far before Colm called out, "Hey, guys? This isn't working."

Emma looked back and saw that Soot had sunk in almost as far as Wings, and his efforts to climb out were only making things worse. The orange streaks in his coat pulsed and glowed dangerously, and the snow all around him was quickly turning to sooty, gray slush.

Emma understood the problem immediately. "It's your fire magic, Soot," she said. "You're trying to keep Colm warm, but it's making the snow melt beneath your hooves. You'll be fine if you turn it off."

Soot nodded, but it took him a couple of minutes to get his inner furnace under control. Even after he finally climbed his way out of the slush, he still left a trail of black smears on the white snow. Soot looked worriedly behind him and sent a mental image of wolves sniffing at his trail.

"Don't worry about it, Soot," said Emma. "None of us can help leaving tracks in this kind of snow. And after the way you blasted those wolves yesterday, your scent would probably just scare them off anyhow."

Soot raised his head and tossed his mane proudly. Colm patted his neck, then flashed Emma a tiny, quick smile. It wasn't much, but it felt like a victory to Emma.

Trudging carefully down the narrow mountain path—if there even was a path under all that snow—was very slow going. As soon as Emma and her friends made it down to the more level ground on the shores of Wintermere, Cayenne picked up the pace. With the snowshoes on, the horses still weren't able to manage anything like a gallop or even a trot. But Emma just felt glad to be moving forward. She was even gladder when she spotted another boathouse ahead, with smoke coming out of the chimneys and an iceboat already tied to the pier outside.

This two-sailed boat was much smaller

and plainer than the Frostskimmer, though. And the three men who came out of the boathouse as Emma and her friends approached looked far rougher than the polished Captain Frisko. They had identical blue eyes and bushy blond beards, but their clothes were a many-layered mishmash of stained leather and faded wool.

"Hello!" called Johan as the horses came to a stop by the pier. "Are you fellows by chance traveling south?"

"We are," said the tallest of the men. "But if you're looking for a ride, we can't help you. The Snowdrift is a messenger boat, not big enough for passengers."

Johan glanced back at the iceboat. "I realize it would be a tight fit," he said. "But we'll pay you well and be very grateful."

"Will you, now?" said the man. One by one, he slowly looked them up and down. "Three hundred gold horseshoes apiece for the horses, and half that for you," he said finally. "The kids can ride free."

"That's outrageous!" said Johan.

"You're welcome to wait for a bigger boat, if you've a mind to," said the man with a shrug.

"Look, you obviously don't know who we are," said Colm, urging Soot a couple of steps forward. "This"—he pointed to Emma—"is Emma Roland. That's Roland, as in Rolanddotter, as in Sigga. Plus she's a Valkyrie."

"Colm, don't!" hissed Emma. "It's okay!"

"That true?" the man asked. He came closer and looked straight into Emma's eyes, as if daring her to lie to him. "Are you on Valkyrie business, then?"

"Yes," said Emma reluctantly.

"Well, next time start off with that," said the man, "and we won't have all this fussing about payment. Get aboard, then. I'm Uwe Isvind, and these are my brothers, Freysten and Oddo."

It was indeed a tight fit, but Emma and her friends managed to get the horses' snowshoes off and settle their steeds in the back of the boat. There weren't any passenger seats on the

Snowdrift, but Uwe said they could sit on the big canvas bags full of letters and parcels he and his brothers were delivering.

As the little iceboat skated south along the edge of the frozen lake, Emma checked to make sure the brothers were busy with the rigging. Then she leaned close to Colm and said, "Thanks for getting them to take us—that was a big help. But how did you know my name would change their minds? Most people don't like being lorded over."

"Depends on who's lording over them," said Colm, shrugging his shoulders. "I keep trying to tell you you're a Roland, Em. Around here, that means everybody loves you."

"Well, they're not going to keep loving me if I go bossing them around," said Emma. "Or so I hear," she added, looking Colm in the eye.

"Maybe if you're nice about it, and appreciate them, and tell everybody how awesome they are, they'll get over it," said Colm. He gave Emma an embarrassed half-smile.

"Maybe I'll do that," said Emma. She grinned back at her cousin, satisfied that things were back to normal between them.

In the end the Snowdrift took Emma and her friends all the way to the southwest tip of Wintermere, right up to the top of Whitemantle Glacier. The brothers refused any payment beyond Emma's heartfelt thanks.

"Just give your Valkyrie sisters our best wishes," said Uwe. "From the Isvind brothers, remember."

Thunder's snowstorm hadn't come this far south, so Johan had no trouble finding the rough trail that ran alongside the western edge of Whitemantle Glacier. From above, Emma had thought the glacier looked like a wide, frozen river pouring out of Wintermere and down the Midwinter Mountains. But after riding along next to it, she decided it was more like a giant castle wall made of pale blue ice streaked with layers of gravel and dirt. Beneath a dusting of snow, the trail next to it was also made mainly of small rocks and loosely

packed dirt. The horses had to step carefully to avoid sliding down the steep mountainside.

If Emma hadn't been in a hurry to get to the next Sunstone petal, she would have enjoyed the slow pace. The views were amazing—glacier to her left, mountain to her right, and shifting blankets of cloud spread out in front of her as if she were flying on Wings. Late that afternoon, the clouds moved higher in the sky and let her see far enough to spot an expanse of blue-gray water far below. Emma realized she had seen this place from Wings's back, on one of the many training flights they had taken with Tyri and her steed Seraphia. If she remembered correctly, that bit of water was called Icewater Bay—and it was only a few miles east of Rolandsgaard Castle and home!

But Emma and her friends didn't quite make it all the way down the mountains, much less to Rolandsgaard, before it got too dark to go on. Instead, they pitched Johan's tent on a partly flat section of the Midwinter Mountains'

mild lower slopes, where a mix of cedar and pine trees grew thickly enough to provide some shelter from the gentle evening rain.

"Now this is more like it," said Colm as he dug a pit for the heatstones. "No snow, no wind—even the ground is nice and soft."

"Too soft," said Emma, unpacking their cooking supplies. "If the horses had had firmer footing, they'd have been able to go faster. Then we could've gotten back to Rolandsgaard in time to have a nice, warm bath and sleep in our own beds."

"Even with good terrain, you don't want to go too fast down a mountain," said Johan.

"Look out beloooooow!" called Colm as he swooped Johan's trowel downward and abruptly crashed it into the dirt.

"Exactly," said Johan. "Anyway, we're past the steep part of the mountains now. I expect we'll reach Icewater Bay early tomorrow afternoon."

"Then I was right—that is Icewater Bay

down there," said Emma. "How far is that from Airistos Castle and the next petal?"

"Well, Airistos Castle is in the Windhome Skylands, and that makes it hard to say exactly," said Johan. "The Windhomes are a whole chain of skylands. Most of the biggest ones—big enough to hold towns, lakes, and castles—float high over Icewater Bay, or near to it. But the chain goes on for miles, and the skylands do drift a little. Even if you've been to one before, it might not be exactly where you left it."

"How are you gonna find the right one, then?" asked Colm. "You and Cayenne can't even fly up there to look for it."

"You think you've seen all my girl's tricks, do you?" said Johan with a grin. "Wait and see."

The next morning dawned clear and sunny, and Emma was so excited that she woke early even for her. While she waited for the others to get up, she sat on a mossy rock and wrote in her Ballad:

Just two more petals left, and I know Nike will help us get the next one today. After that we'll be fresh out of legendary horses. I wonder where the last petal is, and who will be there to help me pick it.

When Emma got done writing, she made breakfast, saw to the horses, and packed up all the cold-weather gear they wouldn't need anymore. Eventually she got impatient and hauled the others out of their blankets. Not even Colm dared to argue with Emma when she got all brisk and busy like that. Soon she had everyone back in the saddle.

"Listen—you can hear the bay already!" said Deru as they all started down the rough trail next to the glacier.

"Hear it?" asked Colm.

"Just listen," said Deru.

At first, Emma didn't hear anything but the soft crunch of the horses' hooves on the gravel next to the glacier. Then suddenly she heard a

deep crack, like a moment of thunder, followed by a higher-pitched roar.

"What is that?" asked Emma.

"It's the glacier," said Deru. "When it touches the water, big pieces break off and float away. That's why they call it Icewater Bay."

Sure enough, when Emma and her friends reached the bay, they saw several miniature blue glaciers floating like icebergs on the calm, blue-gray waters. But right then Emma was far less interested in what was in the bay than what was over it. Shading her eyes, she looked up eagerly and saw the bottoms of at least a dozen floating islands peeking out of a few wispy clouds high above the water. They were close enough that she could make out the rocks clinging to the dirt and a few tree roots dangling underneath. Five or six of them looked big enough to support Airistos Castle. She wished she could see what was on top.

"How do we know which skyland the next petal is on?" Emma asked Johan. "They're kinda

hard to see from down here, and the undersides all look alike."

"The Greenroads will tell us, same as they did before," said Johan. "Unfortunately, there's about a mile of empty air between our Greenroads down here and the ones in the skylands, and that makes it difficult for me to find the connections. But I have an idea that might make it easier. Follow me!"

Cayenne galloped off along the narrow, sandy shore of Icewater Bay. The other horses seemed glad to follow her and stretch their legs out. As they rode, Emma began to spot landmarks she knew. That's Finnerlie, she thought, recognizing a tiny village of thatch-roofed houses and brightly painted fishing boats on the far western side of the bay. That means we've officially crossed into Trails End. Now Emma was glad Tyri had made her learn all the little towns in the vast estate that surrounded her home at Rolandsgaard Castle.

Just past Finnerlie, Cayenne turned south

and led them onto a long, grassy peninsula. A few minutes later, they reached its tip and Johan called a halt. Emma noticed that the strip of land stretched so far into the water that a few of the Windhome Skylands floated directly above it.

"This is as close as we can get to Airistos Castle without flying," said Johan as they dismounted. "Now I just need to connect the Greenroads on the ground with the ones up there." He reached into his bag and pulled out a purple bean with green spots.

"A magic beanstalk! Of course!" said Deru, clapping her hands excitedly. "The coastline here has plenty of sparkle soil to plant it in, and Twig and I can help it grow extra fast."

Johan used his trowel to dig a hole in the grass. Underneath was dark, rich dirt that somehow glittered in the sunlight like a night sky full of stars. Johan planted his magic bean in the hole, refilled it with sparkle soil, and turned to Deru and Twig. As they had with the Everspring Pine, the two dryads danced around the bean until it

sprouted. Soon it grew into a thick stalk stretching far off into the clouds. Emma giggled when it grew so tall it actually bumped into the bottom of one tiny skyland that floated too close.

"So are you gonna climb that, or what?" Colm asked Johan. "I'd tell you to watch out for giants, but I don't think there's room for one on that dinky little skyland up there."

Ignoring Colm, Johan said, "First I'm going to use it to tap into the Windhome Skylands' Greenroads. Emma, come stand next to me so I can use the Sunstone's magic too." He stared at the brooch on Emma's vest until the amber stone glowed, then put his hand on the beanstalk. Almost instantly, he jerked it away with a startled expression on his face. Then he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" asked Emma.

"Fate," said Johan, shaking his head in amusement. "Do you see that 'dinky little skyland' at the top of the beanstalk? That's where the next petal is."

"Are you sure?" asked Deru. She squint-

ed up at the skyland, which didn't look like much more than a clump of dirt in the distance. "Wouldn't Airistos Castle's skyland be one of the big ones?"

"I'm sure it is," said Johan. "But a thousand years ago, this little skyland was probably part of a bigger one. I wouldn't be surprised if Nike herself chipped it off just to make it harder for Ivenna's spies to find the petal."

"However the petal got there, it's time to go get it," said Emma, already climbing onto Wings's back.

"Race you," said Colm as he and Deru mounted their steeds as well.

Wings, Soot, and Twig launched into the air and raced toward the skyland. As they sped toward it, it went from a distant clump to a more respectably sized patch of lawn, as if someone's backyard had broken loose and floated away. Wings had a slight head start, and Emma felt sure they would get there first. But when she looked back, she saw Colm whisper something to Soot.

The orange streaks in Soot's coat brightened, and with a sudden whoosh of flame, he shot right past Wings! Unfortunately for Colm, he also shot clean past the skyland, nearly crashed into one of the big ones, and had to loop crazily through the sky for a few moments before he could stop.

Emma laughed as she and Wings landed neatly in the middle of the skyland, with Twig and Deru coming in behind them. But Johan and Cayenne were already there, standing right in front of Wings. Next to them was a leafy bush covered with white, star-shaped flowers.

"Hey, how'd you do that?" Colm asked Johan as Soot came in for a rather abrupt landing next to Wings. With all four horses and the bush, the little skyland was already getting crowded.

"You came up through the beanstalk, didn't you?" said Emma. "Like you went in and out of the trees back in the Emeraldian Wilds, and again after the fight with the wolves."

"It's called plantwalking," said Johan with a smile. "Cayenne took me up through the bean-

stalk and then out through the Ionic Laurel." He gestured toward the bush.

"There must be dozens of blossoms on there," said Deru. "Which one should Emma pick?"

"We need Nike," said Emma. She peered between feathery clouds to search the bigger skylands floating nearby. They all looked inviting, with well-tended gardens and groves surrounding white stone buildings with elegant, columned porches. But none of the buildings seemed grand enough to be Airistos Castle, and the handful of flying horses gliding between the skylands were all the wrong size or color to be Nike.

Just when Emma started to get worried, the clouds shifted and she spotted a huge skyland covered with trees and waterfalls maybe half a mile off. The white marble castle at its center was so beautiful it took her breath away. Three tiers of columns supported a domed roof topped with a statue of a winged horse. When the statue turned to look at her, Emma realized it wasn't a statue after all.

"There she is!" cried Deru, pointing and

waving at Nike, who flew to meet them. As the legendary mare came closer, Emma felt embarrassed that she'd mistaken Nike for a statue. No work of art could capture the gloss of Nike's pale chestnut coat or the delicate pink of her mane and tail. Even the gossamer ribbons she wore seemed to be every color and no color at the same time.

"Move back," Emma told Colm and Soot. "Give her someplace to land."

Soot cautiously backed up and found a new spot next to Twig just in time for Nike to arrive. The legendary mare landed, furled her powerful wings, and looked expectantly at Emma. Emma slipped down from Wings's back and bowed shyly to her.

"Hello, Nike," said Emma. "Thank you for coming, and for guarding the Ionic Laurel all these years. Please help me pick it so it can be a Sunstone petal again."

Nike nodded and sent Emma a mental image of her right hand picking a particular blossom from the side of the laurel bush. As Emma

stepped toward the bush, she accidentally peeked over the edge of the skyland and saw the peninsula looking very tiny way down below. She was used to flying on Wings, but on her own two feet the height made Emma feel a little dizzy. She held onto the laurel bush with her left hand as her right reached for the magic blossom Nike had shown her. The second it came off into her hand, she scooted back to the middle of the skyland next to Nike and Wings.

A familiar magical light glowed from between Emma's fingers, and she shut her eyes against its dazzling brightness. When she opened them again, the Ionic Laurel had become a gold-edged cloisonné petal, just like the others except for its pale green glow. She sighed with relief when she saw it was perfectly shaped. Emma held the petal up for her friends to see, then put it in her bag next to the others.

"Thank you," Emma told Nike. "I'm so glad you and the other legendary horses were there to help me find the right flowers."

Nike touched her forehead to Emma's and sent her a private mental image of a tapestry. The tapestry showed five horses arranged in a semicircle: Thunder and Fiona on the left, Jewel and Nike on the right, and in the middle a glorious white mare whose mane and tail glittered with tiny white sparks.

"Bella!" cried Emma. "She's the other horse!" Nike nodded, and Emma couldn't stop herself from giving the legendary mare a grateful hug.

"What other horse?" asked Colm.

"There are five Sunstone petals but only four legendary horses," said Emma, counting them off on her fingers. "Bella is the one guarding the fifth petal. And Herd Bellasara's castle is Rolandsgaard—"

"Which means the last petal has been sitting back at home this whole time," said Colm.

"Yes," said Johan slowly. "I remember now—the Rolanddotter Orchid."

"That's what it's called?" asked Deru excitedly.

"I believe so," said Johan.

"Then I know where it is," said Deru, throwing her arms in the air.

"Where?" asked Emma and Colm at the same time.

"In the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden, of course," said Deru. "It's one of the gardens right in back of the castle."

"What?" said Emma. She stared at Deru in confusion. "How come I don't know about the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden?"

"You must've seen it out your window, and walked right past it a hundred times," said Deru. "It's just that nobody thought to tell you what it was called until now."

All those landmarks Tyri made me learn and she didn't teach me what's in my own backyard, thought Emma. Who knew the name of a garden could be so important?

"What're we waiting for?" said Colm. "Let's go get it!"

CHAPTER 8

Reunion

Standing there on the Ionic Laurel's little skyland, Emma could peek between wispy clouds and see Rolandsgaard Castle and its gardens among the other Trails End landmarks spread out far below. More than anything, she wanted to fly straight to the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden and find the last Sunstone petal. But it wouldn't be polite to leave Johan and Cayenne behind, and she had to admit it would take less than an hour to go by land.

So Emma and her friends waved goodbye to Nike and flew or plantwalked down the beanstalk back to the ground. Then Emma and Wings took the lead as they galloped up the grassy peninsula and turned west toward Rolandsgaard. Along the way, Emma eagerly checked off each familiar landmark they passed. There's the big windmill at Wishington, she thought. Only a few more miles to go. Next we'll cut through creepy Darkcomb Forest, then it's left at Cauldron Lake and a quick trot down the Fastalon River.

As they rode alongside the river's merrily gushing rapids, Emma caught sight of Rolandsgaard Castle's glimmering aurastone towers and pink-tiled roofs. Her heart did a happy dance in her chest. She had wondered if the fairytale castle could ever really feel like home, and was surprised to find it already did. She looked up at the rearing image of Bella sculpted into the main tower and imagined blowing it a kiss as Wings stepped onto the drawbridge into Rolandsgaard.

Before Emma and her friends could make it more than halfway across the bridge, someone in the castle saw them coming. Heralds blew trumpets to announce Emma's arrival, and a handful of servants came rushing out to pepper her with questions: Was everyone staying for dinner? Should they prepare a room for her gentleman guest? How long would she and her cousin be home?

Emma shooed most of the servants away, promising to talk with them later on. But one brown-haired girl Emma recognized from the stables waved a folded piece of paper at her and called, "Please, Miss Emma! It's a message for you from Lady Tyri!"

"Hold up!" called Emma. She took the paper and thanked the girl, who dropped a quick curtsy and ran off. Then she opened the message and read:

Dear Emma,

Thank you for sending Waterlily and Lotus to let me know where you went. I hope that by the time you get this you will have found the Sunstone petals and Herd Sunflower, or at least be well on your way.

I'm afraid I haven't done as well with my own quest. I thought Ivenna would keep the Starstone Otter in her dungeon as she did once before. But magical friends inside Styginmoor report that they haven't seen either the otter or Ivenna since the night of Bella's Ball. Seraphia and I are searching all of Ivenna's old hiding places and hope to find the otter soon. When she's safe, we'll catch up with you.

I'm sorry I can't be with you now, but I know you will do your best and make me proud to be your teacher.

With love and best wishes,

Tyri

"What does Tyri say?" asked Deru.

"She hasn't found the otter yet," said Emma as she refolded the message and put it in her bag. "Looks like we'll be on our own a while longer."

"No problem," said Colm with a dismissive wave. "We've been doing fine without her so far."

"I just hope she and the otter are okay," said Emma. "But we can't do anything about that right now, so let's just finish our own quest. C'mon!"

Emma and her friends followed a cobblestone road around Rolandsgaard Castle to the terraces out back. Emma had wandered through and flown over the castle grounds many times, but she hadn't ever noticed just how many little paths and gardens there were. Now she saw formal gardens with sculpted hedges, kitchen gardens full of vegetables and herbs, a little orchard of fruit trees just beginning to blossom—even a water garden full of fountains and aquatic flowers. But none of them seemed to have orchids.

"Which one is the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden?" Emma asked Deru.

"Over there," said Deru. She pointed past the water garden to a low, green hill with a sandy-colored stone wall circling the top of it. A path led up to a wrought-iron gate with an arched stone trellis over it.

As Wings started up the path, Emma began to get a spooky feeling tingling up her spine. "How come this garden has a wall around it?" she asked Deru. "None of the others do."

"The Rolanddotter Orchid Garden was Sigga's quiet place," said Deru. "She and Sunflower planted it together, and she used to come here when she needed to be alone. Other than maybe the gardeners, I don't think anybody's been here since…"

Deru's voice trailed off when they reached the gate. As everyone dismounted, Emma noticed that the stone trellis was carved with decorative orchids, and the ironwork on the gate was

shaped like a winged horse in flight. She took a deep breath and lifted the latch. Though she expected the gate to be creaky with rust, it swung open smoothly and silently.

Emma led the others inside, where the path split into many smaller paths that crisscrossed and circled around dozens of thickly planted orchid beds. More stone trellises arched over the paths here and there, all with built-in pots bursting with even more orchids. Everywhere Emma looked, she saw different kinds of orchids—some chubby and round, some pointed like stars, some with velvet-soft colors, some brightly patterned like butterflies. The mix of floral scents nearly overwhelmed her. But overall the garden made Emma feel calm and peaceful, as if all the flowers were watching over her and keeping her safe. No wonder Sigga liked to come here, she thought.

"So which one of these is the Rolanddotter Orchid?" asked Colm.

"We need to find Bella," Emma said. "Let's start with this middle path and work our

way—"

Emma broke off when she felt a sudden, powerful blast of surprise, joy, and love coming from Wings. Without pausing to send her a mental image, Wings pushed past her and charged off down one of the left-hand paths. And before Emma knew what was happening, Soot gave a delighted neigh and raced off after him.

"Hey, Soot, wait up!" yelled Colm, running after his steed.

"What's going on?" asked Deru. She held tightly onto Twig's mane as if afraid her own steed would bolt too.

"I don't know," said Emma. "Wings thinks it's something amazing and wonderful, but we'd better try to catch them before…" Emma didn't know how to finish, so she just shrugged her shoulders and took off after her cousin. Deru, Twig, Johan, and Cayenne followed right behind her.

Emma turned a corner so quickly that she almost ran smack into Colm—who didn't seem

to notice. He just stood there in the middle of the path, staring open-mouthed at Wings and Soot, who were nuzzling a pure black thoroughbred mare. Emma blinked once, twice, then opened her eyes wide as she too recognized the mare.

"Dowager!" cried Emma in a voice half-choked with happy tears. All thoughts of orchids and Sunstone petals melted away as she ran to throw her arms around the neck of her long-lost friend. Dowager nickered softly to Emma and sent her a mental image of Emma feeding Dowager a carrot in the old barn at Day Mare Ranch back on Earth.

"Yes, I missed you too—so much!" said Emma. "But I don't understand. I was there when you gave birth to Wings and then you… died. How can you be here?"

Dowager sent Emma three mental images. The first one showed Dowager lying very still in the stall next to newborn Wings. Then Emma saw Dowager raising her head to greet a whole herd of shining, magical horses. In the last image, Dowager and the herd galloped away into the night sky.

"I remember," said Emma. "I thought that was just a dream. But they were bringing you here, weren't they?"

"Hello," said Deru.

Emma, who had forgotten about her friends, turned and saw them standing behind her. Suddenly she remembered her manners. "Dowager, these are my friends, Deru and Twig, and Johan and Cayenne," said Emma. "Everyone, this is Dowager—Wings and Soot's mother." Johan gave Dowager a deep bow, and Cayenne did the same.

Twig and Deru just nodded happily. "Oh, we know Dowager from way back," said Deru. "How could we not know Sigga's best brood mare? Just last summer we were there for the ceremony when Jewel celebrated Dowager's return from Earth by making her the guardian of the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden."

"So you were from North of North all

along, huh?" Emma said, stroking Dowager's neck.

"Sigga was allowed to take one horse with her when she was banished to Earth, and she chose Dowager," said Deru. "She always knew that one day she would have an heir, and she wanted Dowager to be the mother of your steed."

Sigga picked Dowager because of me, thought Emma. She wanted me to have Wings. She cared about me a thousand years before I was even born.

Emma was still sorting out what all that meant when she saw a sparkling white horse walking down the path to meet them. Bella! thought Emma, feeling her spirits lift even higher. And skipping alongside the regal mare was Sara, Bella's rider and the goddess of all horses. When she saw Emma, Sara stopped and twirled like a dancer, making her blond hair and the tulip-embroidered skirt of her white dress swirl around her.

"Bella! Sara!" called Emma, waving excit-

edly.

Sara skipped up and gave Emma a hug. "There you are!" she said. "And here's the rest of you, too! So many friends!" She hugged Deru and Johan as well, and blew kisses to all the horses. Each kiss made a sound like soft flute music or leaves rustling in the wind.

"Sara, why didn't you tell me Dowager was alive?" asked Emma.

"Why wouldn't she be?" asked Sara, look-

ing at Emma with puzzled green eyes.

"Back on Earth, she…wasn't. I'm sure I told you," said Emma, frowning as she tried to remember.

"Of course," said Sara. "But horses are so wonderful and loving, I can't let them just pass away forever. Instead, I call them home to North of North."

Emma's mind reeled. I*s every horse that ever lived really walking around somewhere in North of North right now?* she thought in wonder. But before she could get lost in this new idea, the image of a deep purple orchid with golden dots in its center popped into her head. She looked up and saw Bella watching her patiently.

"I'm sorry, Bella," said Emma. "I almost forgot about the Rolanddotter Orchid. Will you please show me where it is?"

Bella took a few steps to one side and stopped in front of one of the stone trellis arches. In a white-glazed pot hanging from the middle of the arch, two clusters of pale yellow star orchids

surrounded a large, round purple one exactly like the mental image Bella had sent. As Emma approached it, both it and the Sunstone pinned to her vest began to sparkle around the edges.

"Thank you, Bella, for guarding the Rolanddotter Orchid all this time," said Emma with a formal bow. "May I please turn it into a Sunstone petal again?"

Bella nodded and sent Emma a mental image of her hands reaching up to pick the magic flower. Emma grasped it as Bella showed her and felt the familiar snap as the blossom came away from its stem. This time, the flower gave off more warmth than light as it transformed into a gold-edged cloisonné petal with a faint purple glow. Emma sighed with relief as she showed it to her friends.

"The last petal," said Johan reverently.

"Yay!" cheered Deru, clapping her hands. "Now you can put the Sunstone back together!"

Emma unpinned the Sunstone from her

vest and got the other petals out of her bag. "Here we go," she said as she began fitting the petals around the Sunstone. The pink one from the Desert Rose snapped into place easily, as did the yellow one from the Ocean Hibiscus. But Emma's heart sank when the bent-edged blue one from the Winter Snowdrop would not fit in its place.

"Leave it for now, and try again after you do the others," suggested Johan.

Emma added the green petal from the Ionic Laurel and the purple one from the Rolanddotter Orchid. The Sunstone's glow grew brighter as each petal went on, and Emma held her breath in hope that its own magic would help the last, bent petal fit after all. But no matter how she tried to attach it, it wouldn't go on.

"Well, it's definitely broken," said Emma, staring at the misshapen petal in her hand. She felt like crying but stubbornly pushed her tears back down. "Sara, can you fix it?"

"What?" asked Sara, looking up from a fat

glitterbug that had perched on her finger.

"This petal got broken when Ivenna and her wolves attacked us," said Emma. "Can you fix it?" She held the petal out to Sara.

"Oh, I wouldn't know how," said Sara. "I'm not a jeweler." She laughed as the glitterbug buzzed away, leaving a zigzag of golden sparkles behind it as it flew.

Now what am I going to do? thought Emma despairingly. If Sara can't fix it, I don't know how a regular old jeweler could do any better, if we can even find one. Wait a minute—Shine! Emma's friend Shine Anders and her family had a jewelry shop right there in Canter Hollow. Maybe Shine could fix the petal!

"If we need a jeweler, I know just where to look," said Emma, putting the Sunstone and the bent petal back in her bag. "C'mon, let's stop by the Treasure Trove and pay Shine a visit!"

Wings started to go with Emma, then looked back at Dowager. He hesitated, then looked at Emma with soulful, dark eyes.

"You want to stay with your mom, don't you?" said Emma, patting Wings's neck. "Why don't you and Soot rest here a while, then? I'll meet you back at the stables later." Wings butted his head affectionately against Emma's shoulder and went back to join Dowager and Soot.

"If you wouldn't mind," said Johan quietly, "I'd like to talk to Sara for a few minutes. Now

that you've found all the Sunstone petals, there are some things— Well, I need her advice."

He wants to ask her about that fairy-girl he loves, thought Emma. "And I suppose Cayenne wants to stay with you," she said. Cayenne nodded. "All right, then, we'll meet you back at Rolandsgaard Castle for dinner, and Wings and Soot can show Cayenne where the stables are."

"I'll come with you," said Deru, taking Emma's hand. "But, um, Twig wants to visit Drasilmare. We've never been away from our tree so long before, you know."

"Okay, so it's just you and me and— Hey, where's Colm?" said Emma.

Emma and Deru looked around, but neither of them saw Colm anywhere. Now what kind of trouble did he get into? thought Emma as she and Deru ran back to the spot on the path where they'd last seen her cousin. Just around the corner, they found him sitting on a stone bench, staring sadly at his feet.

"Colm, what's wrong?" asked Deru. She

sat next to him on the bench and put her arm around his shoulder.

"I'm okay," said Colm. He looked up and tried to grin but failed miserably.

"You don't look okay," said Emma. Colm shrugged. Remembering the look on his face a few minutes earlier, she asked, "Is it Dowager?"

Colm's shoulders slumped and he looked back at his feet. "I killed her," he said. "I took her out at night, and she got pregnant, and it killed her. She must hate me."

"But she's alive now," said Deru. "She's right here."

"No thanks to me," said Colm.

"You're not giving Dowager enough credit," said Emma. "She knew it was time for me to have a Valkyrie steed, and she wanted to get pregnant. You may not have meant to, but I think she knows you helped her do what she needed to do."

Colm stared up at Emma in astonishment, then shook his head. "I wish!" he said. "I was

mad that Dad wouldn't let me ride Soot, and I took it out on her. Bet she knows that too. She's gotta hate me."

"If you're sorry for what you did, why don't you apologize?" said Deru.

"What, say 'Sorry I treated you like dirt and got you killed'?" said Colm, kicking at the ground beneath the bench. "No way a 'sorry' can make up for that."

"No way you can make up for it without one either," said Emma. " 'Sorry' is just a start. After that, it's all about what you do next. And next you're going to help me find Herd Sunflower and save the world, right?" She offered Colm her hand.

Colm took it, and Emma pulled him up off the bench. For a moment, she thought he was going to hug her, but instead he broke into a real grin. "You know, you're smarter than you look," he said. "I'm gonna have to be a pretty big hero if I wanna stay on your team."

"You know it," said Emma, grinning back.

"Now go apologize already."

"Guess I have to," said Colm with a sigh. "I can't do it alone, though." He looked hopefully at Deru.

Deru looked at Emma. When Emma nodded, Deru got up and took Colm's hand. "I'll go with you," she said. "And Soot will be there too. He's probably telling his mother right now how good you've been to him."

"Hey, maybe I have a chance with her after all," said Colm, his face brightening.

As the two of them walked away hand in hand, Emma wondered how she ended up standing there all by herself. You used to wish everyone would leave you alone, she told herself. Now go find Shine before the Treasure Trove closes. With a smile on her lips, she walked out of the Rolanddotter Orchid Garden and headed off toward Canter Hollow.

Next chapter... meet Shine!

CHAPTER 9
Shine

Emma decided she was glad none of her friends had come along as she walked through the familiar brick streets of Canter Hollow. Being on her own made it easier to pretend she was just a regular girl popping into town for a bit of shopping. Emma was tired of being pointed at and stared at. The fuss some people made over her made her anxious. Being "famous" was weird, and she wasn't sure she liked it.

The normally crowded Bagatella shopping district seemed strangely quiet until Emma realized things were winding down for the day. Most of the shopkeepers had already taken in their sidewalk displays and were busy sweeping up or restocking their shelves. The crepe cart had vanished from its usual corner, replaced by a street fiddler serenading the last few shoppers as they made their way home. Emma tossed a golden horseshoe coin to the fiddler's tom-tomme friend, who blew her a little fanfare of thanks on his trumpet-shaped ears.

Emma ducked around the corner of Bagatella Row and Artisans Way, avoiding the *Canter Hollow Post* building and Penny Inkwell's much-delayed interview. A few doors down on Artisans Way she found what she was looking for: a small, but charming, two-story house with a stained-glass door and a large window displaying a few selected pieces of beautifully crafted jewelry. A wooden sign hanging over the door announced that this was the *Treasure Trove*.

Bells jingled as Emma opened the door

and looked around. She was happy to see no other customers inside. "Be right with you," called a girl's voice. Emma walked slowly down a double row of glass-fronted rosewood cabinets, admiring the elegant design of the earrings, necklaces, anklets, mane ornaments, and other jewelry that glittered inside. At the back of the store, a fluffy blue citrustack the size of an upside-down cupcake hummed to itself as it polished a wooden counter. A neatly organized worktable and matching stool sat next to a curtained doorway behind the counter.

Just as Emma reached the counter, a girl with a long, thick chestnut ponytail bounced through the doorway and then stopped short, her green eyes wide with surprise. The citrustack chirped and hopped up onto her shoulder.

"Hi, Shine," said Emma with a friendly smile. "The store looks great! You must've been working hard to have made so many new pieces since the last time I was in."

"Thank you, Emma," said Shine. She busied herself with coaxing the citrustack back onto the counter. "Ever since you wore our jewelry to Bella's Ball, business has really picked up. Thank you so much for inviting me to the ball, by the way. It meant a lot to me."

"I'm glad you came," said Emma. "Too bad you missed the fireworks, though. Colm told me you had to leave early."

Shine blushed and looked down at her hands as she smoothed the flowing skirt of her pale green dress. "Well, actually, I didn't really," she said. "Please don't tell Colm, but… well, he's not a very good dancer."

"Did he step on your foot?" asked Emma, remembering Colm's shiny black boots.

"Four times," said Shine. Both girls burst out giggling.

"Shine? Are you with a customer?" called a woman's voice from behind the doorway curtain.

"Yes, Mother," called Shine, still half-laughing. "It's—"

"Sorry to interrupt, but I have to get to the feed store before it closes so I can pick up some of that special barley Amia likes," said Shine's mother. "Will you close up when you're finished?"

"Of course," said Shine, tilting her head apologetically to Emma.

"Thank you," said Shine's mother. "I'll be back before dinner." Emma heard a door close somewhere in the back of the house.

"Now then," Shine said to Emma. "I'm sure you didn't come here to hear me insult your cousin. What can I do for you?"

Emma pulled the partially assembled Sunstone and the bent blue petal from her bag and laid them on the counter. "This pendant is broken. Can you fix it?"

Shine clapped her hands, and out of nowhere bright beams of white light shone down on the counter and the worktable. Shine picked up the Sunstone and held it in the nearest beam, making oohs and aahs at the artistry of the pet-

als and the flawlessness of the center gem. For a moment, Emma thought her friend had forgotten all about her, lost in the Sunstone's dazzling brilliance.

"Where did you get this?" asked Shine, still gazing reverently at the pendant. "I've never seen a sunstone this big, or cloisonné this delicately colored."

Emma hesitated, reluctant to drag Shine too deeply into her quest. But she decided her friend deserved to know the truth. "It's not just a sunstone," said Emma quietly. "It's the Sunstone, the magical pendant of Herd Sunflower. I need to get it fixed so I can use it to help me find the lost herd."

Shine tore her eyes away from the pendant to stare at Emma, and her mouth fell open. "Really?" she finally asked, setting the Sunstone back carefully on the counter as though she thought it might explode. "And you want *me* to fix it?"

"You're the best jeweler I know," said

Emma with a grin.

"But—but I'm only an apprentice," stuttered Shine. Her hand started to move toward the pendant, but she jerked it back and began fiddling with the smooth green gem on her own choker necklace. "Don't you want to wait for Mother to come back? I'm sure she won't be long."

"The petal's not really broken, just bent a little," said Emma, picking it up and holding it in the light. "See? Just take a look and see if you can fix it. Please?"

Shine reluctantly took the petal from Emma and peered at its bent edge. Then she got a magnifying glass from her worktable and examined it even more thoroughly. After what seemed like forever to Emma, Shine sighed and said, "You're right. It's not damaged all that badly. I might be able to fix it. But I'd have to take off one of the other petals so I can see what the edge is supposed to look like. Is that all right?"

"Sure," said Emma, trying not to sound

worried. But she watched closely as Shine gently worked the green petal off of the Sunstone. It made a tiny snapping sound as it came off, and both girls flinched, then giggled nervously.

Shine inspected the edge of the green petal under the magnifying glass and compared it to the bent blue one. Then she put the green petal back on the Sunstone, looking relieved when it easily snapped into place. "All right," she said, "I think I can do this. Do you still want me to try, or would you rather wait for Mother?"

"I trust you," said Emma, smiling encouragingly.

"Cross your fingers," said Shine, smiling weakly back.

Shine took a deep breath as she brought the petal and magnifying glass over to her worktable and sat down next to it. Then she got out a little bowl of blue powder, an impossibly small anvil made of polished metal, and a miniature oil lamp that reminded Emma of something Aladdin might use. She started to take some-

thing else from a drawer, but changed her mind and unrolled a leather bundle instead. Inside were dozens of pockets containing tiny pliers, tweezers, hammers, chisels, and other tools Emma couldn't identify. When Shine pulled out the hammer and tweezers she wanted, Emma noticed that the tools had orchid shapes stamped into their handles.

"Nothing but the best tools for *this* job," said Shine, rubbing the lamp until it produced a dark, reddish orange flame.

"Isn't that the Rolanddotter crest on them?" asked Emma.

"Yes," said Shine proudly. "They were made for my many-greats-grandparents, back when my family was appointed official Rolandsgaard Castle jewel crafters." She picked up the blue petal with her tweezers and held the bent edge over the flame.

"What do you mean, 'were'?" asked Emma. "What happened?"

"Well, without Sigga around, Rolandsgaard fell on hard times. Nobody there had much need for fancy new jewelry anymore," said Shine. "After a while the castle steward decided there was no point in keeping a jewel crafter on staff just for repairs." As she talked, Shine took the petal off the flame, held it on the anvil, and tapped the bent part carefully with her tiny hammer.

"That's too bad," said Emma. "I'd have liked to have you as my official jeweler."

Shine stopped working on the petal and turned to stare at Emma. "Do you mean that?" she asked, her face wild with hope.

"Um, yes, of course," said Emma confusedly. Then she realized why Shine was so excited. "Can I do that? Make you my official jeweler?"

"Rolandsgaard Castle is yours now," said Shine eagerly. "If you say we're your official jewel crafters—"

"Then I guess you are," Emma said. Shine looked as though she didn't know whether to

jump up and hug Emma or burst into tears, so Emma quickly added, "But you have to fix the Sunstone first."

"Yes, my lady," said Shine, bowing deeply to Emma from her stool.

"And you have to call me Emma," said Emma with a sigh. She leaned over the counter to watch as her new official jeweler went back to work with renewed energy. After a few more rounds of heating and hammering, Shine dipped the petal in the bowl of blue powder, which made a crackling sound like ice being crushed. When she pulled it out, the golden edge looked perfectly shaped, but sort of greenish.

Shine laughed when she saw the disappointed look on Emma's face. "Don't worry—the green color is just leftover bits of cooling powder stuck to the metal," she said. "And Blue here can help us with that."

Shine got up and brought the petal over to the little citrustack on the counter. With a happy chirp, it hopped onto the petal in Shine's palm

and began to spin so fast that all Emma could see was a blue blur.

Chirping excitedly, it spun and danced on the petal. When it hopped off, the petal shone with as much luster as all the other petals on the Sunstone pendant and Emma caught the faintest whiff of blueberries.

"Thank you very much," Shine said, patting him softly on the head. Then to Emma she said, "Nothing polishes jewelry as well as a happy citrustack."

"Here," Shine said, extending the petal to Emma. "You do the honors. The petal just snaps into place."

Emma shook her head, "No, Shine. You've earned the right. You should do it."

"Very well then," said Shine. Carefully, she snapped the petal into place. It gave an audible click, and Emma marveled at the beauty of the repaired Sunstone pendant. As Emma watched, the pendant began to glow softly in Shine's hands. Shine looked deeply into the

middle of the Sunstone gem, her eyes sparkling with wonder. But her expression turned from wonder to fear as her face drained of color and she gave a startled yelp, dropping the pendant to the surface of her worktable.

"Shine! What's wrong?"

"Eyes! Terrible, evil wolf eyes from the center of the stone glowed yellow and then red as flame. It felt like a knife in my heart! I must destroy this thing! I've made it evil!" She grasped the largest of the hammers sitting on her worktable and raised it to smash the pendant into a hundred pieces.

"NO!" Emma cried, as she lunged across the counter and seized Shine's wrist. Shine turned to Emma, her face contorted with terror. The citrustack gave a squeak and fled. "Don't destroy it yet, Shine, please! Let me see it. It will be okay. Just calm down."

Shine hiccupped and swallowed. She blinked several times and gasped. At last she relaxed her arm as she nodded.

"Of course, Emma, of course. It's yours after all. It isn't my place to deal with this." She shivered violently. Emma put her warm arm around Shine's shoulders. "Just don't look at it again, okay?" Shine nodded.

But Emma knew that she must see for herself what Shine had witnessed. She reached for the pendant as Shine took a step back, holding the hammer in front of her for protection. "This must be why Sunflower gave up the pendant—because it's tainted with Wolf Rider magic."

Emma stared deep into the center of the Sunstone. In a moment, the wolfish eyes latched onto her, gazing back into Emma's eyes. A pressure built in her head like a dull headache and began to throb and beat faster and faster. Then she felt something like fingers with sharp nails gripping her skull. "No!" she told it. "You can't have me and you can't have this pendant. Go away!"

But the wolf eyes burned even more fe-

rociously as the Sunstone burst into glowing sunfire. Splinters of refracted light jumped from the cloisonné petals like living fire released from the midday sun. The central Sunstone was even more brilliant—a thousand dancing eyes winked within its hot core, radiating a heat Emma felt on her face. Some kind of powerful magic was warring within the stone. Emma steeled herself; she would not look away. That, she felt, was the key! If she looked away, the Wolf Rider magic would control the Sunstone forever.

Never had Emma felt so vulnerable, and yet so strong! Gazing into the stone she cried, "I am the rightful heir of Sigga Rolanddotter, and I demand you release this gem. I and my Valkyrie sisters demand this!" With that, Emma thought about the orchid garden at Rolandsgaard Castle and her mind held only the image of the Orchid. It covered the flaming eyes of the wolf within the pendant, and far away she heard the singing of women—women riding upon the storm, furious and free.

Suddenly there was a loud snap in the room, like the sound of a spark from a faulty outlet back home, and the spell was broken. The light in the room dimmed in a moment from the fierce, bright light that had been cast from the pendant. It fell, smoking upon the countertop, and there it lay for a moment as neither Emma nor Shine dared touch it.

"Whoa," said Emma, trying to still her racing heart. Shine looked at Emma with concern. Emma held up her hand. "Just a minute, Shine. Let me catch my breath."

After a few moments, Emma leaned forward to look at the Sunstone in the pendant. A broad smile lit her face. "Why, Shine, the Sunstone is healed!" A winged horse had taken the place of the wild wolf eyes in the center of the pendant. "It's Sunflower! The power of Sunflower has healed this pendant of its Wolf Rider taint."

"No, Emma, it wasn't Sunflower's magic that healed the pendant." Emma looked up.

Shine stared at her, slack-jawed and pressed back against her worktable. "It was you! You did it. You called upon the sisterhood of the storm, and they answered. Didn't you hear them singing? Oh, it was magnificent."

Emma shook her head. "I didn't hear—"

"No! Now you must not deny it. I stood right here. I heard and saw it all. They accepted you as one of their own, Emma. They added their voices to yours. It was your command that drove the Wolf Rider magic away. You were amazing!"

Emma just stared at the pendant with a sick feeling in her stomach. "You think so?"

Shine nodded vigorously. "I know it's true."

"Well, the pendant would still be in pieces if not for you," said Emma. "How much do I owe you for the repair?"

Shine tossed back her head and laughed. "No, no, I should pay you for letting me work on a treasure like the Sunstone. Besides, the Anders family are your official jewel crafters now, and repairs are included."

Emma nodded, realizing this was a matter of pride for Shine. Still, she didn't want to walk away without making a purchase of some kind. A thought suddenly came to her: "A pendant isn't a pendant without a chain. Do you have any chains that would be appropriate for such a jewel?"

"Of course," Shine said brightly, escorting Emma over to one of the display cases. "Let me show you."

* * * *

Oh what a difference a bath makes. Emma swept downstairs to meet her friends for dinner. She'd had a relaxing bath, done her hair, and was wearing her favorite dress with the Sunstone pendant. As she approached the dining room, lovely smells whirled around her: roasted meat, fresh-baked rolls, something garlicky, and plumberry pie. Colm's favorite. In the dining room, a celebratory feast was laid out: platters and bowls enough for an army, and the very best china with the Rolanddotter orchid crest around the edges, usually saved for company dinners. When she entered, everybody stood up and cheered—her friends, the servants, and even the tassel mice.

Emma blushed. She didn't feel like she deserved such adulation, but as she gazed into the faces of her friends—Deru, Colm, and Johan—she saw that they needed and wanted her to

be strong. So Emma bowed and accepted their praise.

Over the noise of clanking of silverware on plates, and the murmurs of delight for the superb repast, Emma turned to Johan.

"Johan, what do you think I'm supposed to do with the Sunstone now that it's whole?"

Johan blinked and shrugged. "Emma, I don't know. My task was to protect it and give it to you."

Emma said, "Well, I guess this is another one of those things I'm supposed to just know, but I don't—"

Deru interrupted over her lavender ice cream. "Emma, you need rest. We've been traveling a long time. Get a good night's sleep in your own bed. Sleep is the mother of inspiration!"

"That is true for all of us," said Colm. "I'm dog tired. I'm going to kick off these boots and saw me some big logs."

Deru gasped, a look of alarm on her face.

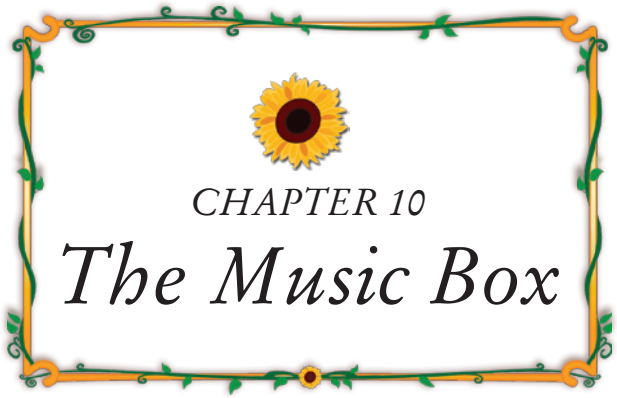
"It's just an expression, Deru. Not real logs!"

Deru scowled at Colm, not quite sure what to believe. "Well, I take your word for it."

Before going up to bed, Emma sat down in Sigga's study and wrote in her Ballad. She looked at the map of North of North that hung on the wall above Sigga's desk and realized how much of it she'd seen for the first time since this adventure began.

The more I see of this perfect place, she *wrote, the more I love this world and want to do right by it. I hope I can.*

Next chapter... the Musicbox!



CHAPTER 10

The Music Box

"…what do you think I'm supposed to do with the Sunstone now that it's whole?"

The question lingered in back of Emma's mind like a worry. Yes, the Sunstone was whole and complete. Moreover, it seemed to have been cleansed of the tainted Wolf Rider magic that had caused it to be broken and discarded in the first place. After writing in her journal, Emma gazed into the Sunstone and tried to detect any hint of darkness, flames, or greedy hunger she felt

when she touched Wolf Rider magic with her senses. But there was nothing. What had Shine said? "It was your magic that healed the Sunstone pendant…" Could Shine be right? Could the Valkyries have heeded Emma's call to unite their voices with hers to cleanse the Sunstone? Emma couldn't imagine any power greater than that, unless it was the power of Sara herself, or that of the group of five legendary horses: Bella, Jewel, Fiona, Nike, and Thunder.

Still, she wished she could be sure. If the Wolf Rider magic was still in the pendant, and only hiding, that could spell disaster in the future when they depended on the Sunstone pendant the most. She wished that Tyri were here so she could ask another Valkyrie's opinion. But that thought spun strands of worry around Emma's thoughts. Silently, she wished Tyri well on her journey and hoped that her Valkyrie tutor was safe from harm wherever she might be.

Emma couldn't sleep so she found herself pacing Rolandsgaard Castle. The marble floors

hurt her bare feet so she kept on the carpet runners in the middle of the hallways.

The fourth time she wandered through the grand ballroom, under the magnificent branches of Sunnivir, remembering the excitement and wonder of Bella's Ball, Emma heard a rustling in the foliage above, and stopped. "Who's there?" She demanded.

Deru's drowsy face peeked through the branches. "You're making quite a racket, Emma."

Emma raised her eyebrows. "I didn't think I was making all that much noise…"

"You were louder than Colm running the dash in Cade Traveler's boots."

"Oh no," said Emma shaking her head. "I hardly think—"

"What's the matter?" Deru asked, being lowered on moving vines that held her like a hammock.

"Oh!" said Emma. "Deru, you sleep here? I had no idea."

Deru shrugged her shoulders. "I rest here, safe in the boughs of the mother tree." Her hair was completely undone and fanned about her like a silky halo. A dozen tassel mice armed with miniature combs pulled their instruments through Deru's hair to work out any tangles or frizzy spots, chattering and giggling in soft voices. "What weighs on your mind?" the dryad asked. "Tell me, and maybe we can both get a snooze in before dawn… chop logs, like Colm says. Curious expression…"

"Saw," Emma corrected her.

"See what?" asked Deru, oblivious.

"Never mind," Emma shook her head and bit her lip. Then she said, "I want to trust the Sunstone pendant to be free of Wolf Rider magic. I can't feel any badness inside, but I'm worried that it might just be hiding and could return unexpectedly." Emma quickly told Deru what she had seen and felt at the Treasure Trove when Shine repaired the pendant.

"Hmm," Deru frowned. "Trust is impor-

tant. Fear not, Emma… I believe what you felt was real. I remember Sigga and her Valkyrie sisters long ago when the Valkyries still protected and safeguarded the magical herds. Their magic, their power, was always in their voices. When they sang…" Deru's eyes shone as she relived the memory in her mind's eye, "…it could be gentle as sunshine dappled upon lily pads, or as furious as the heart of a thunderhead. The united voice of the Valkyrie sisters was a power no Wolf Rider magic could resist. If your belief tells you that the pendant is pure, then trust your belief, and do not doubt."

"That's easier said than done," said Emma. "Where I come from, nothing is quite what it seems. It's really hard to trust anything or anyone."

Deru pulled Emma into a gentle hug. "Then you're much better off here. In North of North, things are exactly as they appear to be—no more, no less."

"Well, that's going to take some getting

used to... but thanks, Deru. I won't worry about it or doubt anymore."

Deru smiled. "Glad to help, Emma. Sleep well and have pleasant dreams."

Emma entered her bedroom suite just as the last chimes of the great-grandfather clock in the hallway struck eleven. But days are extremely long in North of North. Light from the setting sun bathed her room in pink and rouge. Tyri had insisted that Emma occupy the royal chambers, the rooms where Sigga had once occupied. It was odd to think these were the same rooms in which her great-grandmother had once lived.

The large canopy bed with its fluffy feather mattress and piles of downy pillows beckoned to her. The journey to recover the Sunstone petals had been tiring, mostly from the emotional strain it had on her. The relief of finding the Sunstone pendant had made all her aches and pains disappear. She rubbed the sore spot on her cheek where she had been injured

falling through the trees back in the Midwinter Mountains. Johan's medicinal balm had worked wonders; all that was left was an odd soreness.

Crossing the room, Emma collapsed on the bed—only half aware that she was still fully clothed. Closing her eyes, she beckoned for sleep to take her away. Even while she pleaded for sleep she remained awake. The heat from the Sunstone pendant that hung from her neck remained ever present.

Frustrated, she rolled over into a sitting position. Emma knew very little of Sigga other than what she'd been told and the tiny bit she'd read. She felt a pang of guilt—so many people saw Sigga when they looked at her. She needed to know more about her great-grandmother. She needed to understand why people loved her so dearly. This room, her bedroom, gave a particular insight into Sigga's personality. Emma realized that probably very few people had ever had the luxury or the rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of Sigga's personal life.

Sliding to the edge of the bed, she let her feet drop to the floor. Her eyes drifted over to the elegant table next to the bed, which she noticed was hand-carved from a single piece of wood. It had a topiary feel—its antique patina well worn from years of aging. Sitting alone on top of the table was an ornate arborium lamp, delicately crafted to represent three orchids united as one as their petals overlapped to form the shade. A soft glow spilled out from beneath the shade, reacting to her touch. She allowed her fingers to linger on the soft metal for a moment, appreciating the warmth.

Next to the chair where she had hung her satchel sat a wide vanity crafted in the same manner as the bed table, carved from a single block of wood. Its surface was a single slab of marble. On the wall above it was a large, rectangle mirror displayed in an ostentatious wood frame. A few simple objects sat on the vanity's surface: a blue marble washbasin and a small metal rack. To the right of these was a box—

possibly a jewelry box.

Emma crossed the room to get a better look at the box. It had aroused her curiosity. She wondered what Sigga might have used the box for. Her imagination raced with all kinds of possibilities.

Emma's curiosity spiked when she took a closer look. The box was manufactured from both metal and stone. The box's outer four edges were framed with slender metal pieces. Stone panels, possibly marble, were inset perfectly flush within the frame. There was no noticeable lid; the box appeared for all practical purposes to be a solid cube. Engraved into the stone panels were a series of concentric arcs. Each line was painted a different color, creating a rainbow effect. Emma studied each panel and noticed that all the rainbows were different: some large, some small, some with large bands of color and others with smaller bands. She didn't understand what they meant.

Emma slid her hand over the stones' cold

surface, feeling the rough, thin lines under her fingers. Like the lamp whose light came on a minute before, the box came to life upon her touch. Jerking out of the way, she watched quizzically as the lid rose up slowly without any sound until it was fully open. There were no discernable gears or switches or any mechanic device that could explain how the lid moved. Only it did. Emma had learned to accept magic, but it still startled her whenever it revealed itself out of nowhere.

Peering inside, Emma was eager to see what Sigga might have stored inside the magical box. A quick examination revealed the box for what it was—a jewelry box! The inside panels were lined with plush, black velvet. Emma patted her hand around inside hoping to find something—anything—but it was empty. An oval mirror was framed on the inside of the lid and around it was a group of hooks—the kind to hang chains, bracelets, and pendants.

Emma stared into the mirror and studied

the Sunstone swinging from her neck. Moments earlier the stone had kept her from sleeping, even in her drowsy state. Sigga's jewelry box would keep the pendant safe as she slept, she thought.

Pulling the chain she'd just acquired from the Treasure Trove from around her neck, Emma hung the pendant on the center hook. It swayed softly in front of the mirror. It was a truly dazzling gem—its lustrous gold and yellow facets sparkled in the mirror.

Just as she reached for the lid, her hand fell upon a warm shaft of streaming sunlight from the bedroom window that was striking the vanity's surface—the very last sunbeam of the day. For a second Emma hesitated, staring intently at the Sunstone. Inspiration hit like a bolt from one of Thunder's storms.

Instead of shutting the lid as she originally intended, Emma instead slid the jewelry box into the sunlight until the Sunstone was bathed in yellow light. The effect was immediate as

the sunbeam pierced the heart of the Sunstone and refracted a trillion directions all at once. Pin pricks of light streamed in all directions, ricocheting off the mirror and back again into the Sunstone, amplifying the light's intensity. Darkness and shadow disappeared. Second by second the raw power emanating from the stone continued to grow until at last Emma thought it would burst.

Then with a roar of a falling leaf, a rainbow blasted forth from the jewelry box. Up into the ceiling it went, slicing through the castle itself. Emma rushed to the door leading to her balcony. Throwing it open, she ran to the railing and searched the heavens. Rolandsgaard Castle seemed to be giving birth to the rainbow that was now impossibly big.

Below the castle, sleepy Canter Hollow had settled in for the night, blanketed in a sanguine twilight. Now it was painted in a rainbow mirage of dancing lights. Already people were standing in the streets staring up at the rainbow

phenomenon.

Emma grinned impishly after seeing what she had done.

"I see you found a jeweler to fix the last petal?" The voice of Sara came from the doorway leading to the balcony.

"Isn't it amazing?" giggled Emma, turning to greet her friend.

"Yes, it is," said Sara, joining Emma at the balcony railing.

"Did you know this would happen?" asked Emma. "I mean, once the pendant was fixed? Did you know it would make a rainbow?"

Sara shrugged. "Not exactly."

Emma could now hear voices from below. More people were coming out to see the spectacle. Shouts rang through the streets. "What does it mean?" she asked.

"Rainbows are meant to be followed, aren't they" said Sara. "Isn't that what kids always want to do in storybooks? See what's

on the other side of the rainbow?" Sara touched Emma's shoulder. "I suggest you see what's on the other side."

"Whoa, Emma!" shouted Colm, flinging open Emma's door and bursting into her bedroom. "Whoa!"

Colm rushed onto the balcony, craning his neck skyward. "Whoa!"

"Don't you ever knock?" demanded Emma half mockingly.

"Whoa!"

"Shine fixed the Sunstone pendant," said Emma, volunteering the information as a way of explaining the gigantic rainbow arcing out of her bedroom.

"Where does it go?" asked Colm.

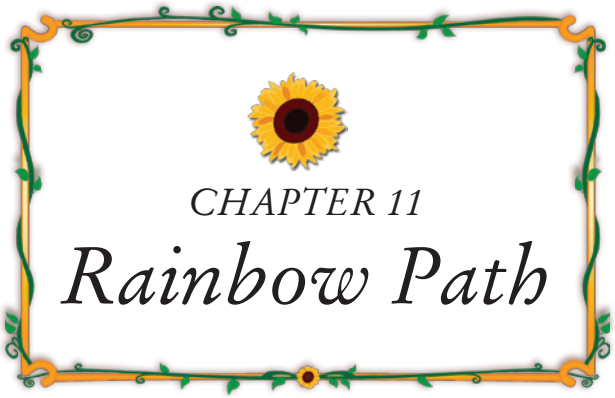
"It looks like it heads east," answered Sara, "toward the Jasmine Forest if I don't miss my guess. Emma was just making plans to follow it."

"Really!" said Colm excitedly. "When are we leaving?"

"Did I hear we're going for another ride?" asked Deru, walking calmly onto the balcony to join the others. She gave a nonchalant glance at the glowing rainbow.

"Yeah, we're going to follow the rainbow to see where it leads," said Colm energetically. "Right, Em?" He then leaned dangerously off the side of the balcony and let loose a good, long whistle. "Soot! C'mon, boy. We're going to search for a pot of gold!"

Next chapter... the Rainbow Path!



CHAPTER 11

Rainbow Path

The rainbow vanished with the setting sun and Colm's disposition sank with it. "Aww! Where did it go?" He moaned as his excitement at the prospect of following the rainbow was crushed. "Does this mean we aren't going?"

"All it means is that we aren't leaving tonight," said Emma, staring at the rainbow jewelry box, the lid now closed. "We can't follow a rainbow that we can't see."

"Don't worry, Colm," Sara said. "Tomorrow you'll get your chance to follow the rainbow." Sara climbed up to sit cross-legged on Emma's bed, her flared dress covering her legs. "You have the key to finding Herd Sunflower. Somehow, and I'm not sure how, the rainbow box reacted to the Sunstone pendant and pointed the way to Petalhome Castle and Herd Sunflower."

"How do you know?" asked Emma.

Sara shrugged. "I don't. I just have a feeling," Sara smiled at Emma. "I've learned to trust my feelings. Sigga was a resourceful woman. She had many tools and magical devices... and secrets. When she was young I taught her everything I knew about horses. But as an adult, especially after she became the leader of the Valkyries, her knowledge and understanding of the world grew, beyond even mine. It doesn't surprise me that she had ways of watching over horses that I didn't even know about. Or," Sara added, pointing at the decorative box on Emma's desk, "in the case of the rainbow box, ways

of finding horses."

Deru had been studying the box, running her hands over its sleek exterior. "How does the box open?" she asked. "I don't see a lid."

"It just opened when I touched it," replied Emma, giving a half shrug. "I didn't see a lid either until it opened."

"Are you sure it'll open again?" asked Colm. "Maybe it's a monster in disguise and it ate the Sunstone pendant right up." He made a loud gulping sound.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Emma as she moved across the room. As soon as Emma touched the box, it slowly swung open and inside the remade Sunstone pendant glistened, as beautiful as ever. "There. See? No problem. The box likes me."

"Just as long as it doesn't like the taste of you!" said Colm, ominously. Then with a theatrical growl, he pounced on Deru, who shrieked and ran out of the room.

"Deru, come back. I was just playing!"

* * * *

The next morning at dawn they gathered on a bluff near the world tree Drasilmare overlooking Rolandsgaard Castle and the town of Canter Hollow, still asleep in shadows. Refreshed from a good night's rest and bellies full from a healthy morning's breakfast, the travelers were excited for what lay ahead. Their long journey to find Herd Sunflower was almost over. Deru and Colm were already mounted on Twig and Soot, ready for whatever came next. Johan stood next to Emma and the rainbow jewelry box.

As the sun cleared the Whitemantle mountain range, its early morning rays reached the bluff where they stood. Emma opened the box.

Once again the large rainbow sprang forth from the jewelry box, arcing high into the sky and pointing to the southeast like a compass

needle. The brilliant early morning sun that caused the rainbow to appear cast a luminous aura around Emma and her companions.

"But once I remove the pendant from the box," Emma asked Sara who was waiting nearby with Bella, "won't the rainbow disappear?"

"Yes," replied Sara. "That's why you can't remove the pendant from the box—you'll have to carry the box while you fly, making sure the pendant remains in contact with the sun at all times. It'll be tricky, but you can do it."

"I can hold the box while you hold the reins," volunteered Johan. "I can't bring Cayenne since he can't fly. No offense, Colm. I would ride with you, but I prefer to keep clean. Soot's good nature keeps rubbing off." He gave Colm a good-natured wink.

"What do you say, Wings?" said Emma, patting him on the neck. "Should we give Johan a ride?"

Wings whinnied an energetic yes.

Sara picked up the rainbow box and handed it to Johan, who had climbed onto Wings behind Emma. "Go safely." To Wings she said, "Fly straight and true."

"Hurry, my friends, and be ever vigilant. The rainbow is visible to anyone with eyes and not all eyes are friendly."

The four companions took to the sky together, led by Emma, Johan, and Wings. The rainbow remained linked to the jewelry box and the Sunstone pendant inside. As Wings gained altitude, the circular shape of the arc retracted as the source of the rainbow moved skyward.

Wings flew cautiously so that Johan would remain safe while he concentrated on keeping the box in constant sunlight. He kept it half-tucked under his arm, and with his other hand he held the pendant in place so that the wind wouldn't blow it away. It was a tricky bit of work but he fared well.

Compared to the long distance expedition they'd taken to recover the far-flung individual

pieces of the Sunflower pendant, the rainbow ride was quick and far less stressful.

"It looks like Sara's prediction is true," Johan called out to Emma. "The rainbow is leading us straight to the Jasmine Forest."

Wings skimmed along the treetops for a half a minute, finally coming to a rest in a wide clearing. Colm and Soot, Deru and Twig followed closely and landed gently as well. Emma immediately noticed the sweet scent of flowers and spices. The lush Jasmine Forest was populated with maples, oaks, elms, and aspens, plus a lot of other wide-leafed trees Emma couldn't identify. The trees, with their large sweeping boughs and bushy leaves, were well-spaced apart, providing ample room for growth. Unlike the Everspring Woods and the Emeraldian Wilds where the trees and undergrowth grew in close proximity, this forest appeared to have been cultivated and nurtured, making Emma think of tidy city parks back home on Earth.

Cut off from the sun under the canopy of

the towering trees, the rainbow promptly disappeared. Emma retrieved the Sunstone pendant from the jewelry box and placed it around her neck. Taking the jewelry box from Johan, she tucked it into her saddlebag, giving Wings a lumpy appearance.

"No pot of gold," Colm sighed. "I knew it was too much to hope for…"

"Oh c'mon, Colm," said Emma, frustration seeping into her voice, "Did you really think there would be a pot of gold sitting at the end of the rainbow waiting for you to pick up?"

"Sure! Why not?" Colm snapped back. "You have a magical jewelry box that produces rainbows. We followed said rainbow on a winged horse. Since we've been to this world we've seen a lot of weird things, including fairies. So explain exactly why it's so hard to believe that a pot of gold might exist."

Emma sighed and shook her head. "Oh never mind."

Colm's chin rose defiantly. "Yeah, that's

what I thought."

"Are you two going to argue all day?" interjected Deru. "Or are we going to find a lost herd of horses?"

"I always figured Sunflower and her herd hid in the Jasmine Forest," said Johan. "But I could never prove it. If Sunflower didn't want to be found, she knew how not to be."

"It smells like Mother Comfort's kitchen," remarked Deru. "I always enjoy smelling her baking. She's the best baker in all of Canter Hollow."

"What is that over there?" Colm asked, pointing. All heads turned in the direction he indicated. A short distance from where they landed, a fortress-like wall of rose brambles extended into the distance in both directions. The top was not visible through the trees high above. "Was that there when we landed?"

"I don't know," said Johan, jumping down from Wings to take a closer look. "I didn't notice… not sure how we could have missed it."

Deru and Colm followed Emma, riding closer to the wall. "Walls are a good place to hide—behind them I mean," said Emma, offering up an explanation. "Don't cha think?"

"It's big," said Colm. "Seems big enough to hide an army."

"Look at all the beautiful roses," declared Deru. "There must be hundreds—no, thousands—of them."

"That's where the smell of flowers is coming from," mused Emma.

"Actually the aroma you smell," Johan said, "comes from all the plants in this forest. It's one of the unique qualities of this magical place."

Deru squealed loudly, causing the rest to jump. She was running over to the hedge. "Look! Looky here!" Deru had spotted something in the hedge wall.

The others rushed over to see what was causing her excitement. Deru had lured a tiny reptile out of hiding and it was now perched on her hand. It was green, maybe six or so inches long, with thorns running along its back and tail. But most remarkable was the red rose sprouting from the end of its tail.

"That's a rose dragon," said Johan, indicating the rose at the end of its tail. "They are friendly little critters who make their homes in flowers. The rose is camouflaged to protect

them from predators. You'll probably find this wall is infested with them."

Sure enough, Emma could see a number of them lurking, watching the kids nervously from their hiding spots in the hedge. "C'mon!" she said, directing them away from the dragon. "We need to see if we can find our way through this wall."

Deru delicately placed the dragon back on a branch and followed Emma.

"Over here, look at this!" called Johan. "I think I've found something." Johan had discovered a hook in the wall that formed an alcove. Like the dragon, the wall had a camouflage of its own. Closer examination revealed the wall had many irregularities. Emma realized a person could walk right past a hole in the wall or a doorway and miss it entirely.

It took a few minutes for Emma's eyes to adjust to the alcove, and slowly it dawned on her that she was standing in front of a series of arched trellises.

"It's a maze," declared Johan. "A network of interconnecting passages. I think one of these doorways leads to Herd Sunflower."

"Which one do you think we should take?" asked Emma. "The last thing I want to do is get lost inside of a maze and never get out."

"Precisely my feeling," interjected a sickly sweet voice from behind them. Emma immediately recognized Ivenna's voice. She swiveled around to face her wolfen rival.

Ivenna sat astride her wolf mount Myrfor while her loyal wolf pack lurked on either side. The red-furred wolf that had tried to steal the snowdrop flower in the Midwinter Mountains crouched next to Myrfor. His yellow piercing eyes spewing hatred. Emma saw that he was missing an ear and great hunks of fur had been burned away, revealing pink and black skin underneath.

Emma grinned with satisfaction knowing that Thunder had made the wolf pay for his

spitefulness. Despite the danger they now found themselves in, Emma's thoughts were for Thunder, wondering if he was okay.

Ivenna, misinterpreting Emma's smile, snapped, "This time you don't have Thunder to protect you." Pointing her staff at Emma, she demanded, "Give me the Sunstone pendant and maybe I'll kill you swiftly."

"These mangy dogs might answer your commands, but not me," stated Emma flatly, the grin now erased from her face. She returned the red-furred wolf's unblinking stare.

Colm and Soot backed away nervously, easing closer to the entrance to the maze behind them. Twig stamped her feet angrily, agitated at being so close to so many wolves and unhappy with Ivenna's demands. Deru pulled Twig backward. "Don't do anything rash!" she urged.

"Insolence will not win you any favors," Ivenna's steely voice was barely controlled. "We are in the last act of a tragedy. Your fate is to die fighting against overwhelming odds. The only

remaining question is how much pain you want to feel."

"Let me taste her flesh milady," pleaded the red-furred wolf. "I'll rip the pendant from her lifeless neck."

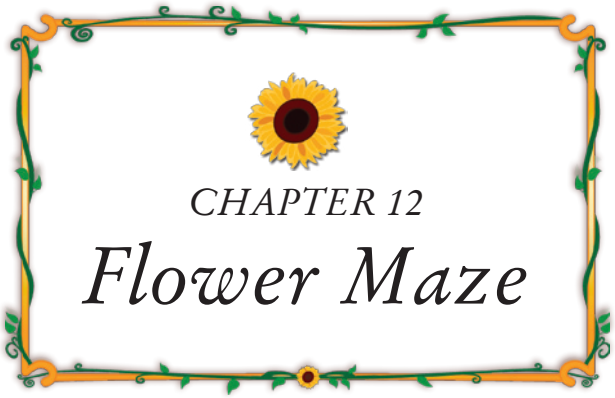
Ivenna sighed and shrugged, considering her loyal lackey's request. "Okay, sure. Fine. Whatever."

The red-furred wolf sprang like a tightly wound spring quickly gobbling up the gap between him and Emma. His jaws extended, hungry for the kill. In a flash Emma raised Sigga's orchid-crested shield in defense. The resulting crunch was sickening. Emma felt a sharp agony as the wolf's claws slashed across her thigh as he crumpled to the ground.

"RUN!" screamed Colm.

He's getting smarter, Emma thought bitterly.

Next chapter... the Flower Maze



CHAPTER 12

Flower Maze

"Into the maze," urged Johan.

"Split up," said Colm. "Wolves are strongest in a pack. Alone, they're slinking, stinking cowards."

Colm and Soot plunged into the closest entrance. Deru followed his lead, directing Twig into an alternate entrance. She gave one look back at Ivenna and shouted, "You're just… just… repulsive!" and then disappeared within.

Emma whirled in her seat, prompting Wings to action. "Let's go, Wings!" she yelled. With powerful strokes from his wings, he and Emma lunged toward the closest maze entrance. The entrances that Colm and Deru had used were already in the process of closing as the rose vines grew at a fantastic rate.

Johan, who remained horseless, attempted to run toward the hedge, but with Colm and Deru inside the maze, Emma was in grave danger. "Hey, you stinking mutts!" Johan screamed. "Over here!" He waved his hands wildly, trying to draw attention away from Emma.

Johan's plan worked for the most part. A pack of six rushed him, but before they had a chance to do any harm Johan faded away, magically merging with the rose hedge. The attacking wolves didn't have time to stop and they collided harshly with the wall. A thousand thorns, like serrated teeth, dug deep into wolf fur and skin. Frustration turned to panic when

suddenly the rose hedge came to life, forming a vaguely human shape. A giant green man stepped out of the wall to attack the wolves with massive, thorny fists. It grabbed two wolves and tossed them skyward through the trees. Unable to avoid their natural instincts, the remaining wolves unwisely attacked the topiary man. But there was nothing physical in which to sink their teeth or rake their claws. Howls of rage turned to whimpers of pain and anguish as rose vines shot out, tackling the wolves and twisting them into prickly cocoons.

The red-furred wolf regained his footing and prepared to pursue Emma, but Ivenna called him off. "I'll get the girl. You go after the other Roland," Ivenna snarled.

"Yes, milady." The red-furred wolf gave chase, disappearing into the same gap in the hedge that Colm had ridden into.

Ignoring the fight between her wolves and the topiary man, Ivenna screamed instructions to her remaining faithful: "The rest of you concentrate on the others. Kill the dryad once and for all!"

Myrfor and Ivenna rushed forward, bounding swiftly after Emma. Ivenna held her head down with her staff out lance-like, but it looked like they were too late. The entrance was already half grown-over to protect Emma's escape. "No!" shrieked Ivenna. *"Do not let her get away!"*

The sight of the receding gap didn't stop Myrfor, who doubled his speed and charged through the barely visible hole. His momentum carried him through the constricting path. Thorns ripped and pulled at both he and Ivenna, but Myrfor and his mistress landed in the maze corridor with an explosion of flower blossoms

and falling vines and leaves. Emma was just galloping away down the long hedgerow.

A picture of Myrfor and Ivenna flashed in Emma's mind. Wings was giving Emma a warning that they were being pursued. Wings increased his speed, keeping his wings tight against his body so they wouldn't be ripped to shreds by the thorny hedges.

The maze was a chaotic jungle of interconnecting corridors and off-chute arterials. A strange, mesh-like floral canopy covered everything, preventing Wings from taking flight. Mazes were intended to hamper movement and disorient would-be trespassers, and this maze was no exception.

Already frightened by the giant wolf and its evil rider that pursued her, Emma was further disconcerted by the unfriendly nature of the labyrinth. Everything she had ever heard about mazes was wrong, or at least the way they'd been described to her. This place had ups and downs, long sweeping corners, and drops.

In some places there were triple and quadruple intersections and earthen bridges spanning open spaces. Barricades were everywhere—some were high, impassable walls and others were low but extremely wide hedges. Everything about the maze was bizarre and disorganized. Emma just hoped she wouldn't run into a dead end.

Panic tightened like a fist in Emma's chest as Ivenna was gaining on her. Emma could hear the Wolf Rider shrieking orders at the giant wolf, driving him under the lash of her riding crop.

Wings was hot with sweat. Large drops of perspiration ran along his hide like raindrops in the wind. Labored bursts of heaving breath escaped his mouth, but he continued to run in spite of his growing exhaustion. "You can do it, Wings," Emma whispered into his ears, feeding him positive energy. "He's just a dog."

Ivenna had become quite a thorn in Emma's side since she'd come to North of North.

Everywhere she'd traveled within its borders, Ivenna popped up. She was a constant driving force attempting to thwart Emma at every turn. Emma and her friends had come so far. So close… so very close. Emma knew Sunflower was near; she could feel it. She would prevail over Ivenna's cruel and stifling power.

The Sunstone pendant felt warm beneath her shirt, jostling about with the rhythmic beating of Wings's hooves. Emma took the stone in her hand and squeezed it, feeling its intensity flare. Strength of purpose washed over her. Wings nickered loudly as he leaped over a high berm in one single, fluid motion. Emma knew he could also feel the Sunstone's power.

A shriek of frustration greeted Emma's ears. Chancing a glance behind her, Emma could see Myrfor had had problems navigating the berm as his movements slowed down to a crawl. Ivenna was hanging precariously off the side of her saddle. The chase through the maze was having a profound effect on the sorceress. Her

fur-lined cloak was shredded and her hair was a frenzied mess.

Without warning, twig-like hands lashed out to snatch and claw at the wolf and Wolf Rider. Ivenna smashed the branches with her staff, spraying splinters everywhere. More gnarled hands shot out and grabbed the staff, causing a tug of war between Ivenna and the hedgerow.

"C'mon, Wings, let's keep going. It appears the maze hates Ivenna as much as we do."

"*EMMA ROLAND!*" boomed Ivenna, her voice echoing supernaturally. But nothing followed—only silence. Emma didn't hear any further taunts or insults. The maze must have done her in. Although Emma hoped for this, she knew it was probably too much to hope for.

A black crackle of energy suddenly appeared in the pathway in front of Wings and he skidded to a halt, forcing Emma to cling to his mane desperately so as not to be thrown forward. The crackle turned into a rip in space and then sprang open to reveal a black doorway. Emma recognized the Shadow Path instantly—the very same doorway Ivenna had used to escape Rolandsgaard Castle.

"This is where your life ends," said Ivenna as she stepped through the shadow path portal with her staff lowered. Myrfor was poised inside the shadow door, ready for any attempt at flight. Ivenna's appearance was a wreck. Blood trickled from scratches on her face, neck, and hands. A freakish wooden arm hung loosely, still gripping her shoulder where it had been severed. Her clothes were torn all over, an entire sleeve was missing, and she had a noticeable limp. Rage blazed in Ivenna's face. She really meant to do harm.

Every bone and fiber in her being screamed, "*Run!*" but Emma was tired of run-

ning. Wings was exhausted, his sleek hide drenched with sweat and his feathers ruffled. Though Wings was weary, he stood resolute next to her, valiant in the face of uncertainty.

"You are as elusive and crafty as a fox," accused Ivenna. "But my scent hounds never fail in tracking their prey. You can run, you can even fly, but in the end I will always find you."

"I'm done running."

"That's wise."

"I'm not done fighting."

Grabbing her shield, Emma slid off Wings. In one hand she had the shield and in the other the Sunstone pendant.

Ivenna burst out laughing with a condescending, throaty chuckle that sounded almost wolf-like.

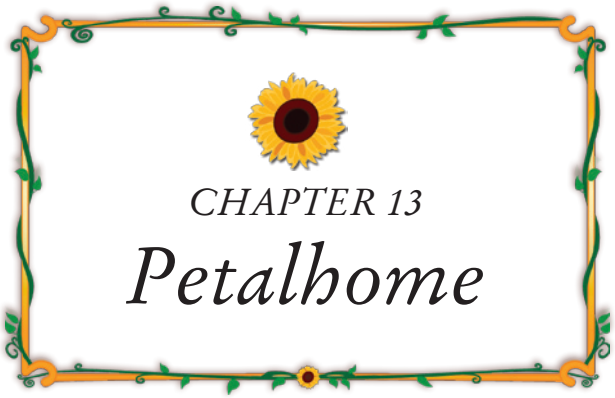
Ignoring Ivenna's amusement, Emma took the Sunstone and touched it to the front of the shield, directly on the orchid symbol. Wild magic exploded as a plague of flowers sprang to life, vitalized by the Sunstone pendant. Each

flower grew upon another until there was a towering mountain that toppled over, producing an ocean wave of flowers.

Caught in mid-laugh, Ivenna fell backward under the surge, pushed back into the Shadow Path portal. The intensity of the wild growth consumed the portal hole. With a gurgling pop, the portal to the Shadow Path winked out of existence.

Exhausted, Emma kept her guard up; she wanted to make sure Ivenna was truly gone. After a few minutes she was finally sure it was over. It was over. A deep feeling of satisfaction swept over her, as though she'd finished the hardest task she'd ever undertaken.

She gave Wings a tired hug. "Thank you, thank you, my dear friend. You are always ready to carry me." He nuzzled her lovingly. A picture of Emma holding Wings when he was newly born appeared in her mind. She had been with him since the very beginning. He would always be with her.



CHAPTER 13

Petalhome

"I'm so worried about Colm, Deru, Johan, and the horses, but it's impossible to go back the way we came," Emma told Wings as they made their way through the floral maze. "We're going to have to continue on, discover Petalhome, and hope that we find them all safe and sound." Wings nodded and neighed in agreement. With Wings in such a state of exhaustion, she couldn't imagine riding him until he got a chance to rest a little. She allowed him a moment to graze on a patch of sweet blue grass and then they were off again. Although they were no longer being chased by Myrfor, Ivenna, and their wolf pack, Emma felt a sense of urgency just the same. She wouldn't be able to calm her racing nerves until all her friends were reunited safe and sound.

Emma's fear for her friends was softened by the pulling sensation of the Sunstone pendant. It seemed to lead her by growing heavier and lighter at each turn. Emma realized this must be the kind of magic Johan experienced when he followed the floral pattern. Flower magic is a fine and graceful magic and Emma felt a sense of happiness following the Sunstone pendant's lead. They obeyed the pendant through twists and turns in the floral hedge, over paths that twisted downward, through grottoes decorated with the gnarled roots of hickory and chestnut trees. In between the roots, crystals of all colors and sizes glimmered in the light that shone through the dappled roof

of tree branches and leaves above.

"Oh my!" Emma exclaimed, as the path opened onto a dim courtyard surrounded by towering trees. They grew so tall and with such great leafy branches that only a single shaft of sunlight penetrated the very center of the courtyard. The ground was covered with moss, and in the center of the courtyard, brilliantly illuminated by the single shaft of sunlight, a white gazebo rose that was covered with ivy. Together Emma and Wings walked to the gazebo. A little stream wound its way through the clearing, and Emma heard the delightful sound of water rushing over stones, and the pop-pop-pop of bubble turtles playing in the shallows.

Emma looked inside the gazebo. Wings pawed the ground and stamped happily. A pitcher of water and a cup sat on the bench inside the gazebo, and nearby a plate holding a piece of yellow cornbread had been set. Emma eyed the cornbread hungrily, but first she filled the cup with glistening, cool water from the

pitcher and drank. Wings moved a little ways away to drink from the stream. There was no note with the food and drink, but the plate, cup, and pitcher each bore the same familiar sign of the Sunflower, stamped into their surfaces. "I think they know we're coming," said Emma. "This is so good!" At last she picked up the cornbread and bit into the moist cake. It was honey sweet and little chewy seeds were baked into the corn meal. Emma inspected the inside of the piece of cornbread and found that sunflower seeds were mixed into it. "This tastes delicious!" she cried, and gobbled it down. After she finished, Emma went to Wings's side and patted his flank. He nuzzled her, spraying water onto her pants with his wet muzzle. Emma laughed and gave Wings a big hug.

When Emma turned to look for the exit from the courtyard, she came face to face with a lion. Emma shrieked with surprise. Wings flapped his wings in alarm. "Wait, Wings, it's all right. The lion isn't moving," she said. She

squinted in the darkness surrounding the gazebo. "Why, it's not a lion at all! It's a bush with golden leaves. It's only trimmed to look like a lion."

Wings trembled and shook his head. More shapes seemed to be appearing out the gloom. "Don't be afraid, Wings," said Emma. The Sunstone pendant was growing increasingly heavy. A green dragon with red leaf wings came into view. A great gorilla made of black and silver moss seemed to lunge toward them. A brown bear made of bristly pine stood on its hind legs, its claws like spikes. "I think it's time to go, Wings," said Emma.

Wings whinnied and Emma thought he was rested enough to ride. She swung up and Wings trotted through the courtyard, passing through two posts that were each carved with the Sunflower sign at the top. Back into the maze they rode. "I don't think they were trying to scare us," said Emma. "I think they were put there to show us what will happen to Ivenna if

she tries to come that way!"

Trees no longer overhung the maze, but the Sunstone pendant still gently steered them whenever they came to an intersection. Emma saw many wonderful sights along the way. They trotted up above the maze at one point, and found themselves on top of a little hill. From here, Emma could look around and see the maze like a vast zigzag quilt, spread out as far as she could see in every direction. Back the way they came, the big green trees that overhung the path looked like a green mountain range. Ahead of them, the path went from green hedges to golden fields of something... Emma couldn't wait to see what lay ahead.

A single weeping willow tree stood on top of the hill, and Emma rested for a moment in the shade.

"Cry, cry, cry.
Weep, weep, weep.
Change tears of sadness

into tears of joy.
Be not sad my gentle one
the earth is full of gladness.
Home is where your tears
will dry and the smiles of friends
will greet you."

"Wings, I think that tree is singing to us," said Emma. Wings shook his mane and looked at the tree uncertainly. "I've never heard of a singing tree. If a tree can sing then it has a mouth, and I don't want to see it." Wings snorted. "Yes, boy, let's hope its bark is worse than its bite."

The golden haze that Emma had seen from afar turned out to be corn fully tasseled and ripening in the yellow sun. The dry sheaves crackled in the gentle breeze. "I name this 'The Maize Maze'!" Emma crowed, and laughed. After their refreshment at the grotto, both Emma and Wings felt a renewed excitement and energy. Emma still followed the directions given

to her by the Sunstone pendant. Without it, she would have been hopelessly lost. Whenever she paused at an intersection, she thought she heard the corn crackling louder and louder. After a while it started to bother her and she glanced back to see what was making the noise, but saw nothing except stalks of ripened corn swaying in the breeze. It made the skin on the back of her neck prickle. "What's going on, Wings?" She muttered.

At last, she was able to turn around so quickly she caught the movement of something small and brown and furry leaping from stalk to stalk behind her. She looked closer. "Wait, Wings, don't be scared… why, look! It's a little tassel mouse, and he and all his friends are following us!" Emma realized that what she thought was the breeze was actually the noise of hundreds of tassel mice following them as they made their way through the maze of corn. They moved like grasshoppers as they sprang from stalk to stalk. Emma laughed, Wings whinnied,

and the tassel mice chittered.

Emma could see something that looked like a large tent getting larger as they approached it. At last Emma was able to make out a structure soaring high into the sky, like a gigantic dome. But the dome was made of stalks of plants—of millions upon millions of flowers. Emma gasped as she tried to take in the sight. The fields of corn stopped where the path passed through a large archway, leading down to the edge of the dome. Emma and Wings rode through the arch and under the enormous canopy of foliage. Every color conceivable was represented in the floral ceiling above her. The sun shone through the petals, stems, and leaves, and cast upon the valley floor like the dappled light through stained glass windows. It was beautiful and exhilarating. The scents that washed over Emma were pleasant without being too strong, and she felt as though she had just awakened from a long afternoon nap, completely refreshed and calm. The fear that she had felt escaping

from Ivenna and worrying about her friends was now like an unlikely dream.

Beyond the far wall of the huge canopy, possibly a mile or two away, Emma heard the sound of waves crashing into the shore. "There must be an ocean out there, Wings. Maybe we'll see Jewel again." Under the dome grew long, waist-high prairie grass and a profusion of wildflowers of all colors and shapes. But aside from the sound of the waves far away, there were no other sounds. Emma suddenly realized that the tassel mice that had followed her through the Maize Maze had not followed her beyond the entrance to the dome. Nor were there any of the common insects or birds that she had become used to seeing in North of North. All was eerily quiet, but Emma's sense of smell was in ecstasy as floral aromas competed with one another for her attention. It smelled like the most elegant perfume counter, combined with the most wonderful candle store, inside the most fantastic greenhouse she could ever have imagined.

"My word, Wings," she murmured. "I really don't want to go any further… " Emma closed her eyes for a moment, just a moment…

"Emma!" At the sound of a familiar voice, Emma's eyes flew open and she jumped to her feet. She blinked and looked around for the source of the voice.

"Deru!" She cried and waved, jumping up and down. Deru skipped through the flower meadow toward Emma. Wildflowers hung in her hair like a living crown. Drops of golden nectar fell from the petals, making her cheeks and shoulders sparkle as though dappled with diamonds. Her joyous face beamed with satisfaction and gratitude. Light seemed to come from her. Her white dress seemed to glow with radiance. "Oh Emma, I'm so glad to see you at last. I was worried. Very worried." But she didn't seem at all worried as she danced forward to hold Emma's hands and give her friend a fond hug. As Deru hugged her, Emma saw a herd of a dozen or so wildflowers running on foot-like roots, scurrying along to keep up with the little dryad. They looked like little lambs following their shepherd. They energetically leaped and bounded, bumping into each other in their rush to get closest to Deru.

"Oh Deru, I'm so happy you're safe. Where are the others—Colm and Johan—have you seen them? Please tell me they're okay."

"Oh, Johan and Cayenne were here when I arrived. Just look at this place," she said giving a graceful pirouette, and pointing to the valley and the amazing dome of flowers. "Isn't it just wonderful?"

"Cayenne?" Emma asked, puzzled. "We left her in Trails End. How did she get here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Deru laughed. "Nothing can keep Cayenne and Johan separated."

"I suppose." Emma was trying to fathom how Cayenne had made it past Ivenna and the other wolves.

Wings, who had been quietly standing next to Emma, joyfully leaped into the air, caus-

ing a mini gale with his flapping. Then he glided over to greet Twig, whom Emma had missed when all her attention was focused on Deru. The two horses nuzzled each other with equine *hello-it's-good-to-see-you-again* gestures. Twig was also covered in a thick blanket of beautiful, vibrant flowers.

"But where did you see Johan?" asked Emma. She felt too peaceful. Something was making her feel relaxed and calm, but she shouldn't be feeling this way until she had proof that all of her friends were safe and sound. She should be worried, but she wasn't. So confusing! The Sunstone pendant felt warm around her neck and seemed to pulse against her. Why, it was the Sunstone pendant itself—not the magical meadow with the dome of wildflowers above her head—that was making her feel this way. But Deru was acting strangely blissful too. Emma decided that it must be because they were so close to Petalhome.

"Deru, Listen to me! Where did you see

Johan?" Deru stopped dancing and looked off toward the edge of the dome, where the ground sloped upward and the dome threaded among and between the tops of mighty grandfather oak trees. "He went that way," she said in her sing-song voice, giggling a little. "He promised he would be safe."

"Safe…" Emma murmured. "Of course he will be safe. How could anything bad happen here?" *Ivenna wants the Sunstone pendant. She will stop at nothing to acquire the Sunstone pendant.* A voice cried in the back of her mind. It was like the singing Willow Tree, but indistinct, like a person yelling from the other side of town.

Deru tugged Emma's arm. "Let's go play," she giggled. She ran as fast as she could toward the oak trees she'd pointed out. Her herd of wildflowers bumped and tumbled to keep up. "Wee!"

There was no possible way Emma could ever keep up with Deru on foot, so she whistled

for Wings and mounted. In a moment, she was trotting alongside the cart-wheeling Dryad. "Deru! We don't have time to play. We need to find Sunflower. Ivenna might find us here at any moment!"

Deru stopped and pouted, her arms crossed. "I'm sick and tired of that stupid Wolf Rider. I'm sick and tired of this quest. It's time we took a break."

"A break? Talk sense, girl!"

"We've been on the run ever since Bella's Ball. I want to play."

Emma frowned. Suddenly she felt cold shivers running down her shoulders, and she shook her head to clear them. Deru was acting very strange, much stranger than normal. It felt to Emma like climbing out of a warm bubble bath into an ice-cold room. "Where's Colm?" She looked back toward the Maize Maze. "Is he still back there? He could be in trouble! We have to find him."

"Oh, don't worry about Colm." Deru

was now dancing with her herd of wildflowers, which she had organized into a square dance. They danced in groups and pairs, hands holding leaves, stems, and petals. Deru giggled with delight. "Allemande Left!" she cried. "Come on, Emma! Come dance with us. It's fun!"

Emma wondered if she should shake Deru or something, to bring her back to her senses. But she was interrupted by a warm, deep voice she recognized, coming from the direction of the trees. "Hello, Emma! Glad to see you're safe and sound."

"Johan!"

The gardener approached from the direction of the oaks, wading through the deep grass and flowers to join the girls. Hundreds of flowers followed him. Emma had a sudden vision of the tassel mice following her through the Maize Maze. "I think there's something odd about this place," he said.

Emma raised her eyebrows, nodding toward the blissful dryad. "You think?"

"Oh, yes, completely odd," Johan said, oblivious to the sarcasm.

"Can you lead us out of here, Johan? Where's the green road?" A blue tulip pulled at Emma, trying to get her down from Wings and have her join the festivities. She gently pushed the flower away.

"Waa!" It cried.

Johan shrugged his shoulders. "I can't find the green road. Either it's not here, or it's so wide it's everywhere here. I can't tell. This field of flowers makes it hard for me to sense the green road."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, you two. Focus! We need to find Colm."

"I'm sure he's fine," remarked Johan. "Let's just wait here until he arrives. I think we need a break anyway." Johan sat down with his back to a mossy lime-green rock. He picked an odd-shaped silver buttercup and took a gulp of sweet nectar from inside. "The rest of us made it through the maze just fine. Colm's a smart

kid, and he's resourceful… don't need to worry about him." He picked another buttercup and offered it to Emma. "Here, have some. It's delicious."

Emma instinctively reached for the flower and then caught herself. Deru was dancing with the flowers and Wings and Twig were frolicking together rubbing their necks together and kicking their legs up. "C'mon guys, we don't have time—"

An explosion of flowers interrupted Emma. A torrent of leaves blasted from the closest hedge wall. Soot, his coat fringed with fire and his mane and tail blazing, appeared as he cut a swath through the dense hedge.

"Watch out, everyone! Make room! Don't blame me for blisters!" yelled Colm.

Fleet-footed flowers scurried to clear a path for the fire horse and his rider. Soot looked like a mad beast from a scary story. Colm looked no better, his clothes ripped and his hair matted with leaves and brambles. Close on their

heels followed the red-furred wolf, which appeared through the same hole in the hedge Soot had just made. He looked the worse for his efforts, as twisting brambles and errant vines wrapped around him, trying to trip him up. The scars from his encounter with Thunder appeared newly opened and oozing.

Eyeing Emma and the others, the wolf halted, crouched down, and bared his fangs. Then he grinned, diabolically pleased with what he'd discovered.

"Hi, Colm!" Deru waved in elation, paying no notice to the wolf.

"See?" said Johan. "I told you he was resourceful." He continued to drink from the buttercup and ignore the snarling wolf.

"Colm, you okay?" called Emma.

"Yeah!" Colm's sooty, scratched cheeks relaxed into a wide grin. "Wow, this place is really, really, nice!"

"I see you brought a friend," Emma said.

"Oh, him?" Colm jerked his thumb toward the wolf. "He's very persistent."

The red-furred wolf let out a long eerie howl. There was no mistaking it—he meant to call his mistress and his wolf brothers, but it sounded half-hearted and less than full-throated. The wolf seemed to be surrendering to the peaceful feelings the meadow evoked in Emma and everyone else.

"So, what are we going to do about—" Emma began. But before she could finish her thought the herd of wildflowers descended upon the red-furred wolf. At first he was simply annoyed at the little flowers, snapping at them as if they were gnats. Then he realized the peril he faced. More and more flowers came at the wolf, swamping him. Soon the wolf was invisible beneath the mound of thriving flowers. Emma could hear the wolf struggling, barking, and snarling. Slowly the guttural wolf speak turned to whimpers and then silence.

It was over as quickly as it had started. When the flowers moved away from the wolf,

Emma saw their handiwork. Where once the wolf had been there was now a red bush in the shape of a wolf—an exotic topiary wolf made of red flowers. She remembered the topiary animals in the Gazebo Grotto and gasped.

Colm was amazed. "Cool!" he said.

Flower magic had transformed the wolf into a bush. Their work done, the herd of little flowers were once again leaping and jumping around Emma and the others apparently having already forgotten about the wolf.

Emma brushed the flowers aside. "We need to get away from here," Emma said gravely to Colm, "or the same thing is likely to happen to us. Deru and Johan are definitely not themselves."

Johan lifted a buttercup in toast to Colm. "Good to see you safe, my young dandelion." He drained his buttercup and smacked his lips heartily.

"Don't call me that," said Colm, peeved. He turned to Emma. "What is he drinking?"

Colm regarded the flower in Johan's hand with suspicion and a little bit of envy. He licked his lips.

"Never mind that. Get Johan on his feet," said Emma. "I'll get Deru. And hurry!"

Emma and Colm gathered Deru and Johan, forcing them to move despite their objections.

"Let's head toward those oaks… there are fewer flowers on the hill." Emma was eager to find a way out of their predicament. "I think the flowers are the cause of Deru and Johan's odd behavior."

"So what do you think is going on? Are we near Petalhome or not?"

"I don't know," said Emma, brushing the over-eager flowers back. "It's these flowers—they're clearly on our side, but they're too much of a good thing."

Colm was now shooing the flowers back too. "Is this some weird Wizard of Oz poppy field thing?"

"I don't think so… Dorothy and her friends fell asleep. I don't feel tired."

"Good. I don't want to be carried away by flying monkeys," Colm said with a grin. Then he looked skyward nervously.

"C'mon, Twig," called Deru lazily as she was being pushed up the hill. "Emma is being a killjoy."

The four horses weren't interested in following—they were too busy playing horse tag among the flowers. Emma watched them for a moment, marveling at their beauty. Obviously in horse tag, if you are it, you can only tag someone else by nipping him or her just behind the chin. "Uh—North of North to Emma," said Colm, snapping his fingers. "Hop to! Break time's over."

"I want another ten minutes," Deru pouted.

As they approached the oaks, the crowds of flowers suddenly stopped following them and kept at bay behind some imaginary line.

"That's just what I expected," said Emma with relief. "Exactly like the tassel mice in the Maize Maze. There's something special about these oak trees that separates them from the meadow below."

"It's Petalhome," Johan said. Then he gave a long, rumbling belch.

"What?"

Johan shook his head as if to clear it. Emma saw focus in his eyes at last. The influence of the flowers must be receding. "These oaks are the hereditary home of Herd Sunflower—Petalhome Castle."

"Well, thanks for keeping that to yourself until now," said Emma, irritated.

"Doesn't look like a castle to me," said Colm, stepping back to get a better look at the towering trees.

"Petalhome is no ordinary castle—not built with tools but grown with seed and earth loam," explained Johan.

"But they're just trees," said Emma, not

comprehending.

Johan smiled, knowingly. "No, not just trees. The Sunstone pendant will show you the way."

Emma took the warm pendant in her hand and gazed into its golden heart where she saw an image of a yellow horse galloping toward a castle constructed of tall living trees.

"Sunflower," whispered Emma. "Show me the entrance to Petalhome."

Without warning the ground began to quake and roll. The mighty oaks came to life, stretching and yawning after awakening from a millennia's long sleep. The massive root system beneath the ground twisted and writhed, churning up the ground and forcing Emma and

the others to stumble backward to avoid being smashed.

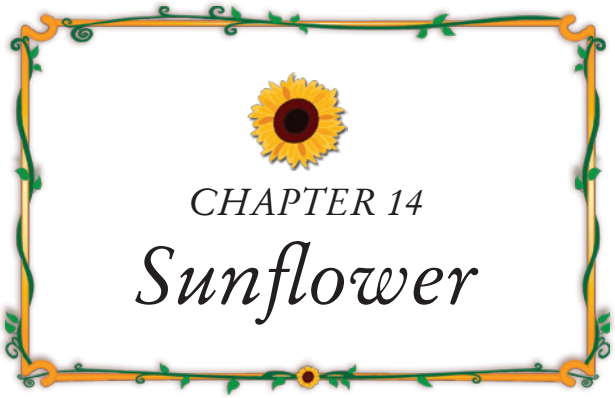
The trees moved together, gathering close in a tightly knit cluster. Their branches wrapped around each other, embracing one another. What moments earlier had been a grove of oak trees was now an imposing wooden castle. The walls were made of thick bark and the roofs were made of tightly woven branches and leaves.

"She's alive!" screamed Colm in a passable mad-scientist impression. "Alive! ALIVE!" Concerned, Deru placed a calming hand on Colm's arm.

"Indeed," said Johan. "But Petalhome isn't a she. The castle is a living, breathing entity constructed entirely of these grandfather oak trees."

Before them rose a grand arched entrance leading into the softly lit green chambers beyond. Johan was right, Petalhome was unlike any castle or building Emma had ever seen.

Next chapter... the Sunflower Herd!



CHAPTER 14

Sunflower

"Our journey to find Herd Sunflower is nearly complete," she said. With a sense of renewed hope, Emma walked into Petalhome.

The first thing that Emma noticed inside Petalhome Castle was the silence that surrounded them as soon as they were fully inside the archway. The wind and the sound of waves crashing to shore that she had noticed earlier were completely gone. Their footfalls made only the softest muffled thumps on the mossy floor. The second thing Emma noticed was the sunlight. It filtered down through the thick canopy of leaves and branches above, and fell with light green dapples on their upturned faces. Emma stopped and stood, marveling at the walls of the castle, made of tree bark, branches, and roots interlocked so tightly they created a living wall.

"I'm spooked," Colm said, with a nervous glance at Emma. "Feels like we're being watched. Makes my skin crawl."

Wildflowers grew in great numbers everywhere they looked, but unlike flowers in the meadow outside, the flowers inside the castle were tall, standing six and seven feet with long stems and huge, iridescent petals.

Colm stopped to study a large, white honeysuckle whose white petals towered over him. Its center glowed with a magical white yellow light, and sparkling dots of energy snapped and popped. The flower produced a sweet

aroma. "Wow, this smells good… like Mother Comfort's honey cakes." He stuck his whole face into the flower blossom and breathed deeply.

Emma gave Colm a gentle nudge. "Are you okay?"

Colm shook his head as if snapping out of a momentary daze, "Oh, ah, yeah." He rocked back on his heels and blinked. "These are not normal flowers."

"Was it their dinosaur-sized petals or the balls of magic floating around them that tipped you off?" Emma smirked.

"Very funny, Emma." Colm put on his best announcer voice, "And now, let's hear it for this world's first Valkyrie comedienne, Emma Roland!"

"Shh!" Emma gripped the Sunstone pendant tightly. It had become increasingly warmer since they'd entered the castle. "Let's not touch anything," she said.

Emma turned to Johan, who was studying the walls. "What do you think, Johan? Have you seen the likes of these flowers?"

"No," replied Johan. "This is not the Petalhome I remember. It's changed since I was last here."

They continued walking down the spacious corridors and made their way deeper into the castle. "Rolandsgaard is the only real castle I've ever seen," said Emma. "And this isn't like Rolandsgaard at all." There were no doors, no light fixtures, no furniture, and no signs of human occupancy at all. Petalhome was a living, breathing castle made up entirely of plants. The ceilings were high vaults with tributaries sprouting off in every direction. Emma imagined that it would take weeks to explore Petalhome because it didn't follow natural lines. They found hidden, unexpected grottos and bridges that arched over inner chambers and hollows. Bright, glowing flowers hung from the ceiling that produced a soft light. The rooms, chambers, and halls were better described as

clearings, ranging from small closets to hundred-foot chambers with ceilings that faded into rough tree branches.

The corridor led them to a massive round chamber. At its center was a placid, fresh water spring about a hundred feet in diameter. A golden glow came from deep down below. At the center of the pond, two enormous flowers intertwined together—a lotus and a water lily. The two flowers faced each other as though they were about to kiss.

Below the surface was an equally vast underwater chamber filled with a vibrant garden of underwater flowers. The spring was deep… extremely deep.

"This I remember," said Johan. "This pool is called Aquarihome. This is where the water horses of Herd Sunflower live… or used to live. The special properties of this pool allow the viewer to see to the very bottom with no sight limitation, despite the fact that it's hundreds of feet deep."

Emma was strangely transfixed as she stared into the pool. No matter where she looked, everything was in vivid detail. It was as if the surface of the pool was a magical focusing lens. Yet no water horses could be seen in the beautiful aquarium-like depths.

"Are there rooms for flying horses as well?" asked Deru.

"Yes, of course," replied Johan. "Similar to Drasilmare, our winged friends live in the branches in the towers above. Petalhome has room for everyone." Everyone craned their necks skyward, as though simply wanting to see them would make the horses suddenly appear. But the branches far above remained motionless.

"So where are all the horses?" asked Deru.

"I dunno," said Emma, heartsick with disappointment. "I thought for sure they would be here."

Colm cupped his mouth and yelled,

"Horses! Horses! Come out wherever you are!"

"Is anyone home?" Deru called in unison.

"Sunflower feared Ivenna and her wolves," remarked Johan. "I guess it makes sense that she'd take her herd away from Petalhome, surely it would be the first place Ivenna would look."

"So what do we do now?" asked Colm.

Emma answered, "We keep looking. Maybe we can find a clue as to where they went."

Time slipped away as they explored Petalhome. It was a remarkable building—the feeling of being indoors and outdoors all at the same time—warm but fresh, clean yet woodsy. Nobody suggested that they split up. Petalhome was too large and too strange to risk anyone getting separated and lost. Finally, at the end of a long corridor they found a door—the first door that they had seen since entering the castle. Two trees stood on either side of the corridor, branches fanned out, coming together to create double doors. The doors were covered in a mosaic of different flowers. At the center was an embossed Sunflower emblem. While they were certainly doors, they didn't have any discernable mechanics.

"A door… this is a good sign," remarked Emma, hopefully.

"Why do you think that's good?" asked Colm.

"Because it's different from anything else we've seen," explained Emma.

Colm scowled doubtfully.

Emma pushed. "It's locked."

"Of course," replied Colm with annoyance. "That's the only reason to have a door. To keep people out."

Deru ran her fingers along the detailed scrollwork on the door. "Johan, what do you think?"

"I haven't seen these doors before… as I've said, Petalhome has changed since I was last here."

"So what opens locked doors?" mused

Emma.

"Knocking," said Deru.

"A doorbell," said Johan.

"A key," said Colm.

"I was thinking the same thing," Emma said. She was already pulling the Sunstone pendant out. "It's kind of obvious."

Colm smiled, "Don't cha think?"

"But if it's the key," Deru interjected, "where does it go?"

"Petalhome revealed itself when Emma called to it," Johan surmised. "I think whoever holds the pendant holds the key to the castle."

"Do the open sesame thing again, Em," said Colm.

"Stand back," Emma told the others. "Just in case."

With the others at a safe distance, Emma held out the pendant. Not knowing exactly what to say, she said, "Open." And then as an afterthought, "Please."

The two trees began to move and some

of the branches that had risen up to form the walls and ceiling began to move, like long tendrils. The branches reached out toward Emma. Startled, Emma took a deep breath and forced herself to stand still. The branches touched her hair, poked and prodded her arms and legs, as if searching for something. Round marbles of golden light slowly fell from the ceiling, surrounding Emma, hovering like fireflies. Emma could feel her hair stand up until it was sticking straight out.

"Em! Are you okay?" Colm cried.

"Yes. Stay back, please." Prickly electricity ran along her skin. It was an odd, tickling sensation but it didn't hurt.

"These trees are not only doors, they're also guards," said Emma, at last realizing what was going on. Apparently satisfied, the marbles flew away, returning to the ceiling. The trees moved aside and their branches returned to their original location.

The doors slowly opened as the branches

pulled apart to reveal a mighty chamber ahead. Emma stepped forward, eager to see.

A thick, white mist hampered her vision. It had the feeling of early morning dew. Emma saw a carpet of small wildflowers on the floor, but not much more. She heard running water.

"What do you see?" Colm asked eagerly.

"Nothing," Emma replied. "The floor is covered in flowers but I can't see anything past the mist. I hear water."

As the mist dissipated, Emma starting to make out more features. It appeared to be a sizable room. Like other parts of Petalhome, trees stood side by side, their wide trunks forming the walls and their expanding branches creating the ceiling above.

"I'm going in," Emma said as she walked slowly through the doors.

"Be careful, Emma," warned Deru.

A shaft of sunlight stabbed through a round dome high overhead. The light was so intense it appeared like a solid column. It was

the sunlight that drove away the mist. In seconds the mist was gone, dissolved into nothingness. Emma stood in a large, round chamber. On the far side opposite the doors a dramatic waterfall cascaded down a series of rock formations into a pool at its base. In front of the waterfall, five giant flowers stood upon a sizeable dais. At the center of the grouping was a ten-foot-tall sunflower, to either side were other flowers: foxglove, lavender, foxtail, and saffron. Each was equally tall, at least six feet. Around the perimeter of the room, spaced equally apart, were other large flowers: buttercup, bluefiddle, camellia, hawthorn, snapdragon, and more.

"This is Petalhome's throne room," Johan said from the doorway. Colm and Deru peered around him into the room. "I think I know what's going on here, Emma." As Johan entered the room, sparkling pollen began to slowly fall from the ceiling, gently at first and then thicker. Colm caught some in his hands like falling snowflakes. The tiny sparkling bits clung

to their hair and skin, giving them a bedazzled kind of illustrative look.

"I recognize this room… this is one part of Petalhome that hasn't—" Johan's words sputtered off. Johan jerked and a spasm contorted his body.

Emma rushed to his side. "Johan, what's wrong?" Brown root-like tendrils sprang forth from Johan's legs, pushing into the ground. He tried to take a step but the roots held firm. Emma screamed. Johan's face turned a light green and then to emerald. He tried to speak, "Sun—", but before he could finish his thought, his mouth disappeared. His eyes stared unblinking and then they too disappeared. Johan was transforming into some kind of plant.

"What's happening to him?" Colm yelled, frantically. "This place is haunted!" Colm wanted to run but found that his feet were also held to the floor by tiny tendrils. "Help me, Emma!" Colm screamed.

Emma pulled Colm's hands. "Help 'em!

Pull harder!" Suddenly Colm jerked and contorted. Emma continued to tug but lost grip as Colm's arms began to shrink. Blood drained from his face in fright, and his skin turned milky white.

"Deru, help me!" But Deru was in no condition to lend aid. She too was wrapped in root-like tendrils. Her body writhed and contorted. "Deru!"

Deru smiled at Emma. "It's okay, Emma." She was dreamily content and in a few short heartbeats, Emma watched Deru transform into a tree… a tiny Drasilmare.

Colm had transformed into a giant dandelion. Johan was also gone—he had turned into some kind of wildflower Emma didn't recognize.

Terror seized Emma. Was this some kind of trick of Ivenna's? Would her friends be trapped here forever as plants?

Then she too felt the tendrils growing up around her feet. The plants grew at an alarm-

ing rate, coiling around her feet and legs. Emma knew it was pointless to resist. Like her friends, it was inevitable that she too would end up as a plant.

The adventure had begun so easily. Oracle had told her to find Herd Sunflower. What was the point? They had traveled so far. It was silly to think that a twelve-year-old girl could change the world and find Herd Sunflower. Sunflower had remained in hiding for a thousand years. Ivenna and her wolves had searched for the lost herds and had failed. What made her believe she could find them? Just because she was Sigga's heir? Emma wasn't even a full-fledged Valkyrie yet. Ridiculous.

Emma cried. She missed her mom and dad and the time she had spent with them growing up at Daymare Ranch. They had taught her everything—all the important things in life, and especially how to ride and care for horses. She wished she was back home on Earth now with her parents—the way it had been before

she found out she had a destiny as a Valkyrie. She wished Wings were here to fly her away to safety. She hadn't asked for this. "I'm just a girl," she thought. "I'm only twelve."

Hot tears ran down her cheeks, tumbling one after another onto the flowers. She stared at the flowers… she was surrounded by purple orchids. Soon, she too would be an orchid, just like the one Johan had given her when they first met at the Pools of Reflection. She reached into her pocket, revealing the bloom Johan had given her. "May this bloom help you find what you seek," he had told her.

Emma remembered the sun acorn he had given Deru. She could even see it hanging daintily from a tiny tree branch that was once Deru. Johan had given Colm a dandelion and Colm had thought it was a weed. "A weed is just a flower that is in the wrong place," Johan told him. Had Johan known more than he let on? The green road had led them here. "All living things give off magical energy," he had said.

"Plants can't move, but they link everything."

Emma stared at the giant flowers that encircled the room and then back to her friends. Colm was a giant dandelion. "Good to see you my young dandelion," she said. That is how Johan had greeted Colm when he had found his way out of the maze.

Right before Johan had turned into a plant he was about to say something… something important. Then it all suddenly made sense.

"I'm not a plant. I'm not an orchid at all." Emma patted herself, rubbing her cheeks to make sure she was fine. She felt fine. She felt like her normal self. Could she walk? Lifting her foot, she pulled away from the orchids that grew around her. She was fine, and more importantly, she knew exactly where Herd Sunflower was.

Emma strode across the room and up onto the dais. She stopped in front of the giant sunflower. "Sunflower," she said loudly, excitement seeping into her voice. She brushed aside the tears in the corners of her eyes. "We've been looking for you for a long time. I know you took your herd into hiding to protect them from the Wolf Riders. My name is Emma Roland. I've come to tell you it's safe to come out, and I brought you this." Emma took the Sunstone pendant out from around her neck.

"I want you to know Johan did a good job. He protected the pendant and didn't let anything happen to it. Don't blame him… I forced him to show it to me. I know I'm only twelve, but I promise you I'll do everything I can to protect you and your herd." Emma released a heavy sigh. "I don't know how exactly… I'll need help from my friends. So, if you could do me a favor and turn them back, I'd really appreciate it. They're my friends and I need them."

Emma reached up on her tiptoes and placed the pendant around the sunflower.

As soon as Emma released the pendant

a funnel of wild energy spun around the giant sunflower. In a blinding flash of light, the flower was gone and in its place was a golden-winged mare. Her mane and tail were a rich chocolate brown with sunflower blossoms braided throughout. The Sunstone pendant hung regally around her neck—its chain replaced with a green, intricately woven vine.

"Sunflower!" Emma gasped with delight. Emma had hoped she was right, but hadn't allowed herself to think about what would happen if she were wrong.

Sunflower stretched and unfurled her wings, extending them as far as she could. She gave them a couple of powerful thrusts and shook her neck to work out any kinks that might have accumulated over a thousand years. Then she looked down at Emma, staring with her big golden-brown eyes. Emma felt as if someone was looking into her soul. A picture formed in Emma's mind, not of her own choosing; Sunflower was projecting an image of a

woman riding a golden-winged stallion. The woman was a Valkyrie and Emma instinctively knew it was Sigga, her great grandmother.

"Yes," Emma said. "I'm Sigga Rolanddotter's heir. I am Emma Roland. Sara found me on Earth and brought me back to North of North to care for the horses… to find the lost herds… to find you."

Sunflower reared up and neighed loudly, and when she did the throne room became awash with magical energy. Emma stared with astonishment. All around the room the flowers were turning into horses. On the dais next to Sunflower were King Floxglove and his Queen Saffron, and beside them were Prince and Princess Foxtail and Lavender. All around the room were the lords and ladies of Herd Sunflower.

"Hey, look!" said Colm. "All the flowers were really horses." Colm's boots were dusty and brown and he was standing on top of the floor, rather than in it.

"You did it, Emma!" Deru exclaimed from

the back of the room, still trying to pull her feet out of the ground. "You found Sunflower."

"Colm! Deru! You're okay." Emma rushed to her friends, locking them in a deep embrace. Colm looked sheepish and awkwardly returned the hug.

"Congratulations, Emma," Johan said, he too back to normal. "Oracle was right. You are indeed Sigga's heir."

"I couldn't have done it without your help,"

Emma said, full of emotion as tears once again worked their way to the surface. "All of you."

The horses of Herd Sunflower gathered on the dais to reconnect after all the years in disguise. More horses flooded into the throne room by the moment.

"I think we should give them time to be together," said Emma. Emma's thoughts once again wandered back to her family. She missed her mom and dad terribly. Just then she heard a familiar nicker and found Wings entering the room, followed closely by Soot, Twig, and Cayenne. She was happy to know that she had a new family, and together they had found Herd Sunflower.

But Johan moved off to the side and didn't join in the celebration that was beginning to unfold all around them as the horses of Herd Sunflower pranced and played with one another. The magic of their awakening, in turn, awakened Petalhome Castle to an even greater majesty. Johan's eyes were downcast and his

shoulders slumped. Emma's heart went out to him. How selfish she was, not to have recognized his loneliness and pain. Emma went to Johan and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Johan, thank you for your help finding Petalhome Castle and Herd Sunflower. I couldn't have done it without you. You sacrificed your own needs to help me, and I promise I will make it up to you. I will not rest until we find Avalynn and you are reunited with her. You have my word on it. The word of a Valkyrie."

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